BROKEN CITY

Broken City Series

Book One

By
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For Granddad
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Chapter One
Deeta

When I was a little girl my Grandmother used to tell me stories. My favourite was about the time her family moved to Devon. It seemed so idyllic, I sometimes wonder if it could have been like that, or if time had coloured her memories. If it had I can’t blame her.

I am sitting on the roof of our building as I think about all of this, behind the barricades of course. No bullets, stray or otherwise, can hit me from here. It always makes me a little sad to look across the blackened structures and smoking rubble that is our city.

I’m told that once it was beautiful. I can never really see it as anything but a harrowing reminder of atrocities that should never have been able to happen, that so called normal people should not have been able to commit.

Yet they did and they still do.

I never saw it at the height of its magnificence; it’s golden years, when it seemed so strong and unbreakable. My father talks of it sometimes. He says it’s important that we know, that we don’t remain ignorant of what happened. Mother never speaks of before. She’s a little afraid, I think, to look back at what she had. Her life was so comfortable, so carefree, so different from the struggle we face now.

Of course, we learnt the particulars in our lessons with Uncle Jep when we were children. I understand how it all came about and how, after it had happened, everything was in disarray. The thought of hunger had driven people into a mad panic almost before the full extent of the damage had become known. There had been looting, angry mobs, and so much violence. Murders had been casual happenings in the street, committed over the barest necessities needed to sustain life.

You are asking, no doubt, what the government was doing while all of this happened.

The answer is nothing.
There was nothing they could do.

The police force had been one of the first casualties to organisation. People had gone crazy and there was no way to control them. It didn’t take long for the police to stop trying. The hospitals had gone on a little longer, but once their supplies ran out they too had become empty, desolate monuments to the past.

In desperation the government turned to the army, hoping that some sort of order could be established. However, it was too late. The army had split into factions, the military bases turning into private militia under the commanding officer of each base. They were in the enviable position of having control of vast resources. With the
promise of food and stability in a world in which both had become luxuries, soldiers agreed to stay and obey orders. When base commanders received orders from government those orders had been ignored, and each base had acted purely in its own interests.

Yet their supplies had not lasted forever.

Thirty years was a long time, and now they were just tribes the same as any other. “Don’t sit so close to the barricade, Deeta.”

Even before I look up I know to whom the voice belongs. “You worry too much, Tom.”

Tomasz shakes his head, a worried frown creasing his forehead. “It isn’t possible to worry too much.” As he sits down beside me I feel his holster brush my arm. As used as I am to guns I shiver, and Tom looks down at me sharply. “If you’re cold we’d better go back in,” he offers. “No, I’m fine.”

I like Tom. He used to notice me when I was a kid and it was condescension on his part to pay me any attention.

“What are you doing up here anyway, Deeta?” I laugh and shrug my shoulders, gesturing towards the skyline. “Obviously I came up to look at our lovely view.” He raises his left eyebrow, the one with a scar above it. “Has Keya been difficult again?”

When we refer to Keya being difficult, we mean bad tempered. I could use a more fitting adjective, but I am too much of a lady. However, on this occasion it was not Keya’s sharp tongue that had sent me scampering to the rooftop.

Tom takes out his knife and begins to sharpen it. “You’re an odd sort of a girl aren’t you, Deeta?” His eyes are concentrated on his work, but I know better than to think that that means he’s in any way preoccupied.

Tom has a way of putting things so you’re unsure if he regards what he’s just remarked on as good or bad. Lots of people don’t like it, it makes them nervous of him, but I think it’s cool. No matter how hard I try though, my attempts at emulating him have only been met with laughter, much to my embarrassment.

We sit awhile not speaking, in silence but for the scrape of the knife against metal. In the distance the sound of a skirmish disturbs the illusion of tranquillity. Bitterly I reflect that even sitting together peacefully we cannot forget the need to fight.

“When do you go out next, Tom?” “When we need to.” At this stage most people would think that Tom was being offish with them. I am not most people.

You see, Tom really believes that he has answered my question. It simply hasn’t occurred to him that I require something more of him.

I sit quietly, watching him fold his knife away. “What’s it like out there?” I’ve asked this question many times before, and I guess I’m asking the wrong person. He answers me in exactly the same way he always does. “More of the same.” He stands, surveying the scene before us. “Believe me, Deeta: you’ve got the best of it staying here.”

That’s exactly what Dad says but I want to know they’re right, not just believe.

Of course you don’t know what I’m talking about, do you? We live in a tower block in the City. I suppose you could say it is our village, and we only leave it when we
have to. When we need something from outside our Guard and the Hunters go ‘out’ to get it.

I will never go ‘out’.

The fifty-eight floors of this building are, to all intents and purposes, my world. I will never leave it. I was born here, I will marry here, I will have my children here, and I will die here. My life, from beginning to end, will have no impact on anyone outside. To them I might never have existed.

I sigh gustily.

“I wish I could see it, Tom, just the once.”

“It would do you more harm than good.”

Tom looks down at me where I sprawl, and in his eyes I can see sympathy.

Those who join the Guard are specially selected for their durability. Only those who have suffered a significant loss in their lives, or have in some way endured hardships difficult to bear, or those like Tom who’ve spent some of their lives on the streets, may join.

Those of us who have not experienced anything like that are protected, against ourselves and against what we would see out there. My father says that the City is full of brutality and horror, and that I wouldn’t survive its harshness. That’s why I’m deemed unsuitable; because it’s thought that I’ve not had the necessary conditioning to endure the difficulties I’d face.

I scramble up from my position on the floor.

“It’s not fair, Tom! What’s so wrong with me that I can’t go?”

It’s a rhetorical question so I’m rather surprised when he pushes the hair back from my face and tilts my chin up. His dark blue eyes scrutinize me carefully but I know that, although he has taken in every feature, it isn’t me he sees.

“Sometimes I can see Tara looking at me straight out of your eyes.”

His look, burning with an intensity that’s foreign to me, lasts for several moments. Finally he shakes his head and releases me.

“You can’t go out there, Deeta; you’re too soft. It would kill you to see what the City has turned into.”

I turn away, looking out over the distance, as a hot blush of embarrassed shame floods my cheeks and neck.

“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s a good thing, Deeta. You’re what we all should be, but what circumstance has twisted into something else. Against all the odds you’ve remained free of all the savagery out there.” He waves his hand in a gesture that encompasses the outside world. “You’re untouched by it all.”

I feel stung by this statement, and my head jerks round toward him. He’s calm, trying to make me understand what he means. I know he’s unaware that his words have hurt me.

“I guess you’re right, Tom.” I stand, feeling the tears beginning to smart behind my eyes. All I want is to leave before they start their inevitable course down my face. That would only make him feel bad, and he doesn’t deserve to. I know he didn’t mean to upset me.

I think I only take four or five steps before I feel his hand encircle my wrist and pull me round to face him. I suppose I must have looked wounded, maybe even accusing, because he seems stricken. It’s as though he only just realises what he has said and all its implications.

“Am I free from sadness? Do you really believe that Tara’s death only hurt you and Nell?”
I hold his gaze only briefly, and then my head sinks in shame. It was a spiteful thing to say. Of course Tom doesn’t think that Tara’s loss didn’t sadden me. However, my loss was insignificant compared to his and Nella’s. Tom lost his girlfriend and Nella lost her sister.

“I – I didn’t mean to sound horrid about it, Tom.”

Tom shrugs his shoulders, dismissing what must be for him an incredibly difficult subject.

“Come on it’s freezing out here.”

Tom walks back to the door, and I take a last look over the City.

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The different tribes in the City started to appear not long after the break down. Families began to group together for safety and take in orphans. My father says that when the violence began after the break down, most of the casualties were men. He said that the women were often forced into lives that were worse than death, but I’m not sure what he means by that and I’ve never quite had the guts to ask him.

The City was overrun with orphans, or street kids, as we call them. With the constant fighting, and different tribes dying out or being wiped out, there is always street kids. Some join the bigger tribes, looking for safety. Some start, or join, gangs.

The gangs are different from tribes; they’re semi-nomadic and very violent. My father always gets really sad when he talks about them; he says that they never really have a chance. They survive in the only way they know how; by using violence and fear to take what they want.

Tom was an orphan, though I don’t think he was ever part of a gang. Professor Jepsjon took him in when Tom was just a boy, after the professor had lost his own wife and child. He says that he saw something in the frightened boy that called out to him in kinship.

Everyone remained curiously unsurprised when Tom came home from one of his trips ‘out’ with a child, a little boy of three or four. I wasn’t surprised exactly; Tom had good reason to feel strongly about the street kids, having been one himself. I was pretty sceptical as to whether he could look after him, though. That was foolish of me, as Tom can do pretty much everything - and I’m not exaggerating.

The building that we live in belongs to our tribe. As tribes go we’re pretty small, and we try to be non-combatant. Our territories are quite remote, which helps, and mostly no one bothers us.

The upside to being a small tribe is that we have lots of space. If we wanted to we could go days without seeing anyone, just by keeping to our own floor.

The Grey family lives on the floor above us. I’ve mentioned Keya already. She’s Mr and Mrs Green’s only child, and their pride and joy. I can see why, I guess. She’s a redhead beauty that has most of the single men in our building falling over themselves to please her.

Tom doesn’t think much of her. He says all the beauty in the world couldn’t make her bearable to live with. I told my sister Clare about it, and she said something about protesting too much. She doesn’t know Tom very well; he doesn’t waste words, especially not on lies.

The Clarks live on the floor below us. They’re kind of a big deal as their family started our tribe. Their son, Jamie, is considered one of the best warriors. I don’t like him very much, he’s always bragging about how great he is. He’s very big and muscular, good looking too I suppose. Between you and me, I think he’s a can short
of a six-pack. Ralph, his brother, is much nicer. He’s only two years older than me and great fun. He’s always laughing, joking, and helping people. Ralph’s kind, and in our world kindness like that is rare.

Nella lives on the floor below them with her Aunt Lea. Most people think Nella’s insane, but that’s just because she cracked several of Jamie’s ribs when he asked to marry her. She’s my age and has been going ‘out’ since she was fifteen. I’ve heard that she and Tom make a formidable team.

Dad sent me down to her for combat lessons a few years ago and we’ve been firm friends ever since. She says I have a beautiful form, and graceful efficiency, but I think she’s just being careful not to hurt my feelings. I always feel a bit gawky in her presence.

Nella’s a very quiet girl around people, not because she’s shy or anything but because she’s reminded of what she’s lost. Her father died ‘out’ and her mother died a few years later, leaving her and Tara, her twin sister, to their Aunt Lea’s care. She and Tara were allowed to join the Gaurd when they reached fifteen, and placed under Tom’s supervision.

Tom says that Tara wasn’t made for the world outside. He said that after their first expedition ‘out’, but no one paid any attention to him because Tara was an excellent member of the team. It made it all the more tragic when she died in a skirmish with another tribe.

Everyone liked Tara, she was gentle and kind. Tom, I think, was in love with her. I can understand why he thought Tara was special. Her good qualities had been crowned with the kind of beauty that inspired poets.

I cried when she died; hot and painful tears, the sort I hope never to cry again. Nella didn’t cry for days. When she finally did break down I thought her tears would never stop.

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Sometimes I wonder how Tom and Professor Jepsjon manage the children. Ricky, the bedraggled little street kid that Tom bought home all those years ago, is now a responsible fifteen year-old. He has been replaced in the mischief stakes by Dec, an energetic eleven year old that Tom brought back as a baby. He takes everything I say as a challenge, and yet he can be so good. His round chubby cheeks, so much like the cherubs in Professor Jepsjon’s bible, seem constantly at odds with his actions. Yet I find the cheek of the boy is somehow endearing. Most of the time I find myself laughing at him, when I know I really ought to remonstrate.

And so now there are five of them. Ricky is the eldest. Roydon is next at thirteen and his mind is firmly fixed on any fun that he and ten year old Dec can manage. Carris, eight and into anything the boys are into, and Tarri, four. Tom brought her home as a baby shortly after Tara died and we named her for the friend we missed so much.

A soft hand pulls my thoughts back to the present.

“Tarri, I’ve only just put you to bed!”

“I’m thirsty, Aunty Deet.” Her voice is sweetly pleading.

“I’ll bet you are. No doubt when you’ve had a drink and are safely tucked up in bed again, you’ll discover that you need another blanket or that your hands are sticky: I know you cod fish, even though you’re in disguise.”

I lift her on to the side and press the glass of milk into her eager hands. She watches me preparing dinner as she sips it, her large brown eyes soft and thoughtful.
“Aunty Deet, why don’t we go out?”

The knife slips from my deadened fingers and clatters on the floor. I was ten before I asked that question, she is only four.

“Because we’re safer here in the compound.”

I look at her black curly hair and her sweetly dimpled cheeks, realising that she will one day do something I never can. When she’s older, she will enter the guard and see the world beyond the compound. She has the strength and curiosity that will make her the perfect asset.

The idea fills me with dread.

She’s just a child. A small, helpless child that I have loved and cared for ever since Tom brought her home, the tiniest of bundles hidden safely in his jacket and quietly sharing his warmth.

I realise that I have been staring at her for a longish time and smile.

“Are you ready to try napping again?”

She drains her glass and I swing her on to my hip, taking her back to her room. As she snuggles beneath the blankets she turns to me, her face a picture of contemplation, before suddenly asking me a question.

“What’s it like outside?”

“More of the same.” I smile as I hear myself using the familiar phrase, and kiss her warm soft cheek.

I find Dec and Roydon sprawled across the sitting room floor when I leave the girls’ room. Their faces are intent and serious, and an old chess board sits between them.

“Why the long face, Roy?”

“You’d frown too; he’s beating me again!” He looks up at me. “What would you do?”

“Hey, fight your own battles; it’s cheating to ask for help!” cries Dec. His cheeks are flushed an excited red, and his eyes are sparkling. I know that Dec will beat Roydon this time too, he always does.

“Move your bishop and take his castle,” advises Ricky, not looking up from the book in his hands.

Roydon subjects the board to intense scrutiny.

“If I do that he’ll take my bishop with his pawn!”

Ricky regards his ignorance with surprise.

“And if you don’t his castle will check mate you in four moves.”

Dec folds his arms across his chest in mock disapproval, but I know that he’s enjoying pitting his wits against us all.

Three quarters of an hour later, and Dec is deliberating his next move with careful consideration. Eventually he shifts his knight and Roydon takes it with his queen, a triumphant look on his face.

“You lose, Roy.” Tom’s voice comes from the doorway as he hangs up his leather coat. He unwinds his scarf as he moves in to the room, and looks down on us where we are huddled on the floor. “Dec lined you up nicely.”

Roydon studies the board again, and slaps a hand to his head.

“The knight was bait!”

“The proverbial sacrificial lamb.” Professor Jepsjon smiles, entering the apartment behind Tom.

Dec has jumped up from his position on the floor and latched hold on to Tom’s hand, tugging until he receives Tom’s full attention.

“Well what is it?”

“Did you shoot anyone today?”
“What a repellent tyke you are: no I didn’t.”
The professor settles himself into his chair and I hand him a cup of tea.
“Is that for me, my sweet? Dziękuję.”
I smile as I pass Tom his mug.
“You must be so cold; it was freezing when I brought your lunch up?”
“You get used to it.”
“Never mind you can shoot one tomorrow,” interrupts Dec.
“What did you say?” Tom is frowning and Dec, realising he has said something
wrong, sits on his stool at the table and concentrates on his knife and fork, keeping
wisely silent.
“How were the greenhouses today, Uncle Jep?” I ask as I begin to set dinner on the
table.
“The tomatoes will be excellent this year, but I have lost hope in the cabbage.”
Tarri wanders in from the bedroom and climbs onto the professor’s knee.
“Hello, Tarri; have a nice sleep?”
“Mmm — yes.” She snuggles up against Uncle Jep, winding her arms around his
neck.
“You must wash your hands for dinner, little one,” he reminds her gently. As he sits
down to the table he seems to remember something and turns to Tom.
“I was speaking to Mr. Green today, apparently Keya has joined up.”
Tom continues carefully cutting Tarri’s food into smaller pieces, not looking up as
he answers.
“It’s a mistake.”
“You think so?” asks the professor.
“Yes.”
Tom finishes his task, and pulls one of Tarri’s pigtails affectionately as he gives her
the fork. The professor realises he has asked the wrong question and tries again.
“Why is it a mistake?”
“She’s completely selfish. Her only reason for joining is because Nella is in the
Guard, and Keya’s competing with her. She likes the idea of being classed as an
amazon, but hasn’t though of what it will really mean to be outside the safety of the
compound.”
“You think she will be in danger, that she will be badly equipped?”
“The only people in danger will be the rest of the Guard; she’ll sell us out the second
she’s in a tight spot.”
I wipe my hands down the front of my apron. I’m not really listening to their
conversation, but worrying about the steady advance of the hands around the
grandfather clock in the corner.
“Utie me would you, Tom? I’m going to be late for dinner again.”
I fidget impatiently as he pulls at the knots.
“Out of curiosity, why did you knot it three times in the first place?”
“I don’t know how it happens, but I’m always doing it,” I answer, glancing over my
shoulder.
Tom drags the last knot free, and I pull the loop over my head. Casting the apron
over the back of the chair nearest to me I mutter a quick goodbye, and hurry down to
my apartment. As predicted dinner has already commenced by the time I sit down.
“Deeta, I wish you wouldn’t spend quite so long up there.” My mother’s voice is
worried. “You don’t want people to talk.”
I suppose I should have known right then where this conversation is headed. It has taken place so many times that I should by now know the warning signs, but unfortunately I don’t catch on.

“Talk about what?”

“Deeta, you’re up there all day every day. Now I’m not saying you’ve done anything wrong, but just think how it looks.”

“Mum!”

“It has to be thought of; you have to remain in good standing or you’ll never get a boyfriend. And if you don’t have a boyfriend you’ll never have a husband. What if your father is killed out in the City? Who will look after you then? Just look at Nella: a prettier girl you’ll never see, but because of that fuss with Jamie the boys stay well clear of her.”

“Isn’t that just because they’re afraid she’ll flatten them?” asks Jan dryly.

“That is beside the point and you know it, Jan,” replies my mother tartly. “Deeta, you know that I’m thinking of you. Do you want people whispering about you behind your back?”

“But I’ve always —”

“I know you’ve always looked after the Jepsjons, but you’re not a child any more, Deeta. You’re twenty years old and very good looking — spiteful tongues will say hurtful things.”

“I hardly think that anything could be said when Tom and Professor Jepsjon spend most of their time on duty. Besides, don’t you think that five children are chaperone enough for even the most gossiping old biddy?”

“I keep forgetting that you think all women as perfect as me.” My mother smiles. “You don’t know how catty women can get.”

“Well I don’t deny that I was clever enough to pick the best of the bunch,” laughs my father. “Deeta is of great help to the Jepsjons, and that isn’t something I want to dissuade.”

“You don’t have to worry, Mum. Tom isn’t — I mean we’re not…” My voice trails off, and I can feel my face beginning to glow hotly.

Under the table Jan’s hand clasps mine. I almost shake her off. That sounds bad. I haven’t explained it to you properly. You see Jan has decided, for some weird and wonderful reason, that Tom and I are blighted lovers! I still have no idea where she got the idea.

The atmosphere has become a little uncomfortable and Jan clears her throat, trying to introduce a new topic.

“I was talking to Denny in the greenhouses today, and apparently Keya is joining up.”

My mother, her fork halfway to her mouth, pauses and for some moments her hand remains immobile. Then she hurriedly excuses herself from the table.

“What did I say?” enquires Jan bemused.

Clare purses her lips and twists a tendril of thigh length wavy hair around her finger. She is waiting for her fiancé Phillip to call for her and they’ll go dancing on the forty-third floor.

“If Keya is joining up Mum will want one of us to join up too.”
Chapter Two

Deeta

We stare at her as she tosses the thick blonde strand over her shoulder as though she’s unaware of the stir she’s caused.

“What do you mean?” asks Jan.

Clare leans back a little in her chair.

“Janny darling, you may be young but you’re not stupid. In our world, to us girls, marriage is everything because none of us are deemed suitable for the outside world. We are…” She lifts one long leg and slides it slowly across the other, allowing her fringe to fall sultrily over one eye. “Much too soft.” Somehow she manages to make it sound incredibly attractive.

“But if Keya is allowed to join, then there can be no objection to us joining up either,” she finishes.

“You don’t seem very worried about it?” observes Jan.

“You’re forgetting something: I’ve already hooked a man. There’s no reason for me to join up now.”

“If you ask me, he’s hooked you!” Clare smiles, content to let us tease her. A knock falls on the door and she moves to open it, sending us a mock quelling glance. From where we are sitting we can’t see the door, but there’s nothing wrong with our hearing.

“Clare, put him down for goodness sake; you’ve only just eaten.” Philip blushes rosy red as we crowd around the door.

“H-hello girls, h-how are you?” he asks.

I’ve often wondered how Philip managed to court my sister, let alone ask her to marry him. He’s a very shy person, and his stutter makes him silent most of the time. I’m pretty certain that if Jan hadn’t prodded him into action, Philip would still be admiring Clare from afar. Yet Jan is still dissatisfied: she’d wanted a detailed word and picture account of the proposal. However, all Clare would say was it had been very romantic.

When they leave the flat is very quiet. I generally go up to the Jepsjons’ after dinner and put the children to bed, but I don’t want to leave Jan by herself. I pull on a jumper, and fluff her hair as I walk past her seat.

“Coming Janny?”

“Sure!” From her display of alacrity, I gather there is nothing she would like better.

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The children are listening to one of Uncle Jep’s stories as we enter the flat. It’s an idyllic picture. Tarri has again wrapped herself around Uncle Jep and, with her head on his shoulder, is staring sleepily into the fire. The rest of the children are huddled on the floor, the fire’s warm glow playing over their excited faces.

Of Tom there is no sign.

“Jan, my dear, so pleasant to see you. Come, you must sit by the fire.”

Ricky stands and offers her his seat to one side of the fire, but she motions for him to sit down. Instead she settles herself on to the floor, hugging an excited Carris to her as the girl endeavours to recite the story so far.

The professor heaves himself from his chair and offers us refreshment.

“I’ll do it, Uncle Jep, you’ve had a hard day.” I take the saucepan out into the hall and fill it with water from the tap. There is a communal tap on every floor that’s fed from the tanks on the roof. Usually there’s a restriction as to how much water we can use, but at this time of year the restriction is relaxed.

I had expected the professor to continue with his story, but as I enter the kitchen I find he has set out the cups for me and is awaiting my return. I place the pan on the range, watching him lean against the work surface. His intelligent eyes study my face for a moment.

“Was it very bad, Deetina?”

I jump violently, and the teapot clatters as I put it down.

“Deetina, didn’t you think I knew? How many times have you run up here when your worries became too much for you?”

I feel a little put out that I have been so transparent, and we lapse into silence. I find myself wondering where Tom is.

“He took over guard duty from Jeff, he’ll be up on the roof all night.”

Knowing that the professor has detected the pattern of my thoughts yet again, I feel a hot blush mount my cheeks. Uncle Jep pats my shoulder realising he has startled me.

“You must remember that I have known you since you were a very little girl, my dear.” He smiles at me and changes the subject. “Where is Clare?”

“She’s gone dancing with Philip.”

“Fortunate Philip. How come you did not go too, Deetina?”

“There isn’t much point.” I laugh. “It must be sour grapes I suppose; I don’t want to play gooseberry!”

I’m pouring steaming hot tea into mugs before he speaks again.

“You are still very young, Deeta — sometimes I forget how young.”

He takes the tray from my unresisting hands, and is at the door before he notices that I am not following him. I look up from the flask I am making for Tom to find his smile upon me.

“Make sure you wrap up well; it will be cold on the roof.”

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Uncle Jep is entirely right. As I step out on to the roof the wind hits me with bracing coldness. The night as black as pitch, and I slide on a patch of ice. For a moment I think of calling out to Tom, but discard the idea. He wouldn’t hear me above the roar of inclement weather. I walk slowly into the darkness, careful not to slip, but within a few moments I’ve lost my bearings.

“There’s not much of a view at this time of night, Deeta.”
Tom’s voice, deep and quiet, startles me. He is standing quite close to me, and I realise that I’m not surprised but I’ve been waiting for him to find me.

“Tom!”
My hand shoots out blindly in the darkness, and I feel his solid frame to the right of me.

“No need to hit me, Deeta.”
I take a firm grip on the lapel of his leather jacket.

“Tom, for goodness sake don’t leave me: I was lost!”

“Lost?” His voice is blankly incomprehensive. “You’re the only person I know that could get lost on the roof of their own building.”

He takes my hand, and leads me through the darkness to the shelter. It’s such a relief to escape from the chill wind. I don’t mind Tom’s amusement, which is just as well because he’s always thought me a little nutty.

I take the flask from my bag and pour him a cup of tea. Tom commands great respect when it comes to tea drinking. I’ve never known anyone who could drink as much. He folds his hands around the mug and blows into it, sending a billowing cloud of steam into his face. The smell of hot tea on the cold night air takes me back to the many other times that I have sat, just like this, with Tom. Both of us relax, gazing out into what I could almost believe to be empty blackness. It’s as if the shelter is the only thing for miles around.

Gunshots erupt in a burst of sound and I jump, knocking Tom’s arm. Tea spills from his mug, and in the ensuing silence I can hear it dripping from the cup. Four drips, the length of time between each one a little longer than the last, until they stop altogether.

“It came from the south — over there,” says Tom after a while. “About a mile, maybe a mile and a half, away.”

The knowledge that there is a considerable distance between us and those sounds is comforting and I relax back into the shelter. How Tom knows how far away those gunshots were I have no idea, but somehow I know that he’s right.

We sit silently for some time, it’s only after I pour Tom his second cup of tea that he speaks.

“So?”
Tom usually starts conversations in this monosyllabic way, but generally I know what he’s trying to convey. This utterance, however, has me stumped.

“So... what?”
“What happened?”
“About what?”
“You’re up here.”
“I usually come up here when you’re on duty.”

Tom nods, and blows into his cup again.

“The thing is; I’m not on duty.”

I must look at him as though he’s out of his mind because he grins, and shakes his head.

“Jeff asked me to take his watch. The only way that you could know that is if you had seen Uncle Jep after I left, and Jeff didn’t ask me to take his watch until after you’d gone downstairs.”

It occurs to me that I should be embarrassed, considering the topic of conversation around our dinner table. Swiftly I decide to furnish him with an edited version of events.

“Keya’s joining up.”
“You knew that before you left.”
“I did, mother didn’t.”
Tom nods, and looks at the ground. It’s almost as though he hasn’t heard me, but I feel reassured by his silence. It’s comforting because he knows: he understands. There is nothing more that I could say to him that he hasn’t already guessed.
I think back to our dinnertime conversation. I’d been so positive that with Clare as good as married our mother would slow down a little, at least for a while. However, she seems to have got worse and I’m next in line.
I don’t want to get married.
No, that’s not quite true. It isn’t that I don’t want to marry, I do one day. I just can’t visualise it happening. I mean, who would it be for starters? Our choice is pretty limited as the Clarks don’t really fraternise. I know that some tribes are close enough to cross marry, but we’re too insular for that. My only choice is from those within the tribe. Thank goodness that, apart from that mad moment with Nella, Jamie has never looked at anyone but Keya. I can’t imagine anything more unpleasant than marrying him.
Ralph?
I guess worse things have happened, but I don’t relish the idea of marrying someone I love like a brother. It’s kinda sick.
“She’s not so bad you know, Deeta.”
“Who isn’t?”
“Your mother.”
“Oh, I know that. It’s just she’s so intent on getting rid of us. I know she’s thinking of us, but I don’t want to marry anyone and she keeps pushing.” I shove him playfully. “It’s alright for you; no one would dare push you to do something you didn’t want to.”
Tom’s expression is curiously fixed, almost as though I’d slapped him. He bends his head, and begins to sharpen his knife — again.
I suddenly realise that in mother I am fortunate. For all her pushing I have never once doubted that she loves me. Even this obsession with getting us settled is proof of how much she cares for us. She knows what happens to unmarried women with no protector. They occupy the lowest position in the tribe, relying on the charity of the Elders to survive. All in all their lot is pretty grim.
I’m not used to that sort of hardship. My father is Leader of the Hunt; that means that we have the best of anything the hunt brings back to the compound. The soldiers and their families were on the social rung bellow us. Their primary objective is to scavenge anything that might be useful, and trade with the other tribes in the City.
As much as I wish my mother wouldn’t keep pushing me at every available man, I know I’m lucky to have her.
Tom doesn’t have a mother.
I sit pondering this fact in something approaching shock; I can’t believe I’ve never really considered it before. Tom has never spoken about either of his parents — at least, not to me. Tom rarely starts an idle conversation, and he never voluntarily talks about himself or anything to do with his life before he joined our tribe.
I guess because one of my earliest memories is Tom and Uncle Jep's arrival, I’ve never really thought that he was somewhere else first. To me Uncle Jep has always been his father, but he was somewhere else first and he was there for thirteen years.
I look at Tom again.
Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a void has opened up. Thirteen years, only three years less than the time I have known him. That’s almost half of his life that I know nothing about.
Tom has finished sharpening his knife, and stands looking out into the darkness. “Are you coming, Deeta? I’ve got to do the rounds.”
I nod and get to my feet. The wind isn’t so fierce now, but still it’s very cold. We aren’t allowed to show a light in the darkness, and so we are walking blind. At least I’m walking blind: Tom can see in the dark, I think.
“Did you eat your carrots as a boy, Tom?”
“Come again?”
“Did you eat your carrots when you were younger? I’m not a great fan of carrots, unless they’re raw, or mashed with swede and butter. I did eat them, though, so I don’t think it’s fair… did you?”
Tom laughs, and shakes his head.
“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Deeta. Even for you that was pretty rambling.”
“Carrots are good for your eyesight.”
“What a very edifying piece of information; your conversation is always so enlightening.”
“You what?” It’s my turn to lose track of the conversation.
“Yes, Deeta; I did.”
“I thought you must have, you know it’s funny but — oops!”
I trip over something in the darkness, and land with a bump on my right hip. Tom’s rumbling chuckle sounds out in the gloom, and I scowl.
“Are you alright?”
“Your concern for my welfare is truly heart warming.” I reply with dignity. Or at least, that’s what I was aiming for. The thing is it’s very difficult to be dignified when you’re sitting on an icy cold floor with a dead leg. Tom lifts me easily, and sets me on my feet.
“Poor, Deeta; would you like me to rub it better for you?” he asks, leaving me in no doubt that there is a huge grin on his face.
“Take a running jump, Tom.”
My fist goes out to punch him playfully, but he catches it and presses it against his sleeve.
“You’d best hold on, or next time you might break your neck.”
We finish the rounds, and thankfully sit back in the shelter. I’ll have to get going soon as it’s probably late. I don’t know how Tom and Nella can stay up here for such lonely stretches of time. I couldn’t, but then I wouldn’t have to; one or the other of them would come and keep me company.
I pour Tom another tea, the last in the flask, and munch on one of the biscuits I brought. Carris helped me to bake them today.
“When does your shift end?”
“Some time after dawn.”
I stretch, and start to pack away the flask. Tom watches me in silence.
“Do you want me to leave the bickies?”
He nods, and I leave them on the small table.
“I’ve got to get going, Tom, or I’ll fall asleep right here.”
As I stand Tom also gets to his feet.
“Do you want me to take you to the door?” He grins. “You wouldn’t want to get lost again, would you?”
The door is only a few yards away, but it would probably have taken me ages to find. I say goodnight, and make my way back to our floor.
My father is reading as I enter.
“How was Tom?” he asks, looking up at me an smiling.
“Cold, but three teas thawed him out a little.”
I bend to kiss him goodnight. As I reach my bedroom door his voice calls softly over the distance that separates us.
“Remember you have greenhouse duties tomorrow.”
“Alright, Dad. Goodnight.”

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I’m dreaming, watching in a strange disembodiment as my dream takes its course. Tom and I are standing on opposite sides of a chasm. It’s widening with every second and Tom is calling to me to jump, promising faithfully that he will catch me.
Scared, I hesitate on the edge.
I know, in that strange way that you always do in dreams, that if I don’t jump I’ll never see Tom again. Still I delay, hovering uncertainly at the edge. Tom stops calling to me, and lifts his hand in a friendly gesture of goodbye. It spurs me into action, and I take a running leap.
I don’t make it to the other side, but fall and keep on falling down the endless cliff face until the sky is just a memory above me.
“Deet, wake up!” Jan is shaking me gently, her voice softly pleading. “It was just a dream, please don’t cry.”
I realise belatedly that my cheeks, and a vast amount of my pillow, are wet. Still confused and groggy from sleep I pat her hand absently.
“I’m okay, Jan, really. I don’t know why I’m crying.”
“Are you sure you’re alright?”
“I’m fine.”
Seeing that Jan is fast overcoming the concern she felt at first, and that her curiosity is beginning to take a strong hold on her, I snuggle back down into my covers and bid her a sleepy goodnight. I can tell by the way she hovers beside my bed that she is still weighing up the possibility of finding out what distressed me so much as I slept. Finally she withdraws, and I hear the metallic creak of her bed and the rustle of covers as she settles herself for sleep.
I wait for a few minutes before turning over to face the wall. My father says that dreams mean something; like the ones where your teeth fall out telling you you’ve said, or are going to say, something wrong.
As I lay in the darkness I try to work out what my dream is trying to tell me. Usually when I have difficulty fathoming them out I tell Dad. He seems to understand them instantly.
I can’t tell him about this one though; the content is a little too suggestive and could be construed in an entirely embarrassing way. I don’t want Dad to think I’ve got a crush on Tom. My head is aching, and I decide that maybe I’ll understand what my dream is telling me when and as it happens.
My last thought as I fall asleep is that I left my gloves in the shelter with Tom.
“How many more trays do we have?” asks Dec over his shoulder.
“Three sixty plug, four twelve plug…” Carris’s head appears from under the table.
“And five medium pots.”
She waits expectantly for Dec to finish his mathematical calculations. I don’t usually bring them all down here at once, but Tom didn’t come back until half past five and I didn’t want the children to wake him. Dec is still thinking, a small furrow between his brows. Absently he holds his arm out towards Roydon who promptly rolls up Dec’s sleeve.
“Give me the sixty plug.” He commands at last, reaching an imperative hand out behind him.
Carris immediately thrusts the tray into his hand, and he begins to fill the plugs with soil from the sieve he is shaking above the tray. Finishing with the sieve he passes it to a waiting Roydon.
“Water!”
The command is scarcely out of his mouth before the watering can is placed into his hand. He measures the water carefully into the plugs, his eyes half closed.
“Seeds!”
Is the next order and Roydon passes him the container of seeds. Carefully, one by one, Dec places them into the plugs.
“Soil!”
He shakes the soil over the seeds and steps back to view his handy work, one hand held up in a gesture of silence.
“Say nothing, words are inadequate.”
“Just remember to label your trays this time: remember what happened last year,” I warn.

The greenhouses are, as usual, very bright and humid. Denny and Jan are watering at one end, and Tarri is on the floor digging in some soil. She loves the greenhouses, and often comes down with Uncle Jep.
“You look absolutely filthy, Dec!”
Dec looks up at Ralph Clark and wiggles his fingers in the air.
“Self sacrifice and all that jazz, Uncle Ralph!”
The children have always called Ralph ‘uncle’ even though he is no relation. As he is a close friend of Tom’s they seem to feel as though they have a right to claim him. Ralph, I know, is rather proud of the title.
“Ricky seems to have been self sacrificing in an entirely clean way though.”
“Huh, he used his fingers I used —”
“Everything else?” asks Ralph with a grin. “How are you, Deeta?”
“I am sacrificing myself as well, Ralphie. I didn’t know you were on greenhouse
duty too?”
Ralph shakes his dark blonde head.
“I’m not; I’m on farm duty.”
“We aren’t exactly on the way.”
“No but,” Ralph grins, “I thought the boys might want to come along and help me.”
“I bet you did.”
“Why only the boys?” ask Carris indignantly.
Ralph swings her up into his arms easily.
“Because I can’t half inch the lot of you from Deet, can I?”
Carris sees the logic of this statement and agrees seriously.
“Well, how about it boys?” asks Ralph.
Ricky, Dec, and Roydon are straining at the leash to go, but Ricky, as thoughtful as
ever, turns to me first.
Perhaps we could go down later, when we’ve finished helping you?”
Although he is trying to hide it he’s very eager to go.
“You can go now, we’ve almost finished here anyway.”
The boys vault the table, which in the restricted space is quite alarming, to express
their glee and Ralph is borne away in front of them towards the door.
“Hey, Ralphie; make sure there’re back for lunch would you?”
Ralph salutes and is swept from sight in the midst of three very excited boys. Within
ten minutes I’ve finished my shift in the greenhouses and tidied up behind us. I pick
Tarri up from the floor and dust her off.
“You look like you enjoyed yourself, chick?”
Her cheeks are flushed a rosy red and her pigtails have somehow become
dishevelled.
“Yes, do we still have biscuits at home, Aunty Deet?”
“Yes we do, but you ate three straight after breakfast this morning so you can only
have one more.”
We begin to return to the flat, but after the second flight of stairs Tarri tugs at my
arm.
“Aunty Deet, my legs are too tired to go any further.”
I heave her into my arms, and proceed up the stairs with Carris close behind me.
We reach our floor breathless and stagger into the sitting room, whereupon Tarri
informs me that she’s so thirsty she could drain a well. Being carried up the stairs
must be so tiring.
I fetch three glasses of milk and a plate of biscuits through to the lounge, before
sinking gratefully into a chair. For a moment there is silence as we recover.
“What shall we make for lunch then?” I ask at length.
Carris suggests bacon and egg butties, and Tarri several highly impractical
delicacies.
“Bacon and egg butties sound great.”
Tom appears in the doorway of his room in the process of pulling on a jumper. His
hair is tousled and he hasn’t shaved yet, the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow are
dark on his face.
“You haven’t slept very long.”
“It was enough. How many flights did you make it up, mush?”
He moves into the room, picking up a biscuit and pulling one of Tarri’s pigtails.
“Only two, Uncle Tom, Aunty Deet carried me the rest of the way.”
“And what have you been up to, Carry?”
“We went to the greenhouses; I helped Dec plant tomatoes and beans,” answers Carris.
“And I helped Aunty Deet plant cabbage.” Tarri frowns. “I don’t know why we plant cabbage; it’s horrid.”
I smile at the face she pulls.
“Would you like a cup of tea, Tom?”
“Yes, please.”
Tom follows me into the kitchen and, as I put the pan on to boil, he leans against the work surface.
“Where are the boys?”
“Ralphie took them with him down to the farm. No doubt he’ll play the ‘I’ll be the master and you be the slaves’ game with them. Poor kids, they’ve no idea what they’re in for; they actually wanted to go!”
“Ralph’s a lot of fun, they’ll have a good time.” Tom makes a careful study of his shoes. “We’re going ‘out’ tomorrow.”
Tom has said this very same thing many times before, and it always has the same unsettling effect on me. My stomach seems to jump, and I get a funny feeling at the back of the tops of my legs. It only lasts for a few seconds, but it always leaves me feeling oddly drained.
“How long?” My voice is quiet, but I’m please to find I’ve kept it calm and steady.
“A few days.” Tom shrugs. “Will you stay up here while I’m gone?”
I always do but Tom always asks, he never takes it for granted.
“Sure, I’ll ask my dad.”
We lapse back into silence.
I hate it when Tom goes out. It scares me.
Each time he does I spend the best part of four days and four nights worrying if he’s eating properly and warm enough. I try not to think of the dangers out there, about the guns, fire bombs, and ambushes.
“Thanks, Deeta. By the way; were you aware that you have mud on your face?”
“I happen to like it there; where is it?”
“Left cheek, your left.”
I brush a damp cloth over my face.
“Has it gone?”
“No, I can still see a dirty bit… oh no, wait, that’s you.”
Tom receives the dishcloth full in the face and sighs resignedly.
“The trouble I get into for trying to help!”
For that the tea towel joins the dishcloth.
I’ve always wondered what it is that Tom does while he’s ‘out’. I’ve only asked him about it once, and I will never ask again. I don’t talk about him going ‘out’ any more, he goes all quiet and I hate how uncomfortable that makes me feel.
“It kills you doesn’t it, Deeta?” Tom smiles gently.
“What does?”
“Not knowing what we do?”
I’m surprised that he’s bringing this up; generally he avoids the topic as it is one of the few we disagree on. I look up to find him watching me, a faintly surprised expression in his eyes, as though he is a little unsure at himself for voluntarily starting this conversation.
“I have a new philosophy about that: what I don’t know about simply doesn’t exist to me, so I don’t need to worry about it. It’s better that way.”

Tom smiles again and we are silent as I spread butter over the bread I’ve just sliced. “But you do wonder, don’t you?”

The knife in my hand stops moving. I stare at it for a long time before turning uneasy eyes on Tom.

“What is it, what do you want to know?”

Tom shrugs his shoulders, and opens the door of one of the cupboards nonchalantly as if looking for food. Tom knows this kitchen as well as I do, so the fact that that cupboard houses, and has always housed, plates is just another sign that something is not right.

“Just curious.”

I’m more than a little freaked out at this point. Tom is never ‘just curious’ about anything. He always has a reason for asking a question; in some way my answer was important to him.

As I break the eggs into the frying pan and check the bacon, I am uncomfortably aware of Tom’s eyes upon me. There’s an unfathomable expression in their depths that unnerves me. A cacophony of sound in the living room alerts us to the fact that the boys are home, and Ralph saunters into the kitchen.

“There you go, Deet; three rowdy hungry boys deposited at your feet in time for lunch.” Ralph grins at Tom. “Roydon said you were on duty until half five, if it had been me I’d have needed all day in bed to recover.”

Tom’s reply is drowned out as Roydon and Dec burst into the kitchen, and begin to chase each other around the table. Ralph comes to stand by my side and, as they dash madly around the room, he turns to me apologetically.

“Just for the record; I had nothing to do with this. They must have been mad before I got them.”

“Ralphie, you could get an Egyptian mummy excited, never mind the boys.”

I look at them helplessly.

Ralph will be no help in calming them down, he can’t undo the effect he has on them. Tom reaches out and grabs Roydon’s jumper.

“That’s enough,” he states mildly. The two boys stop, sit down quietly at the table, and grin up at Tom.

“What have you been up to?”

“We fed the pigs and mucked out the cows,” answers Roydon.

At this point Dec breaks in.

“Aunty Deet, you wouldn’t believe the mess the pigs made! It was much, much worse than our bedroom, and you’re always saying that’s a pigsty!”

“Oh, I think you could give the pigs a run for their money,” I assure him.

“And the cows, you wouldn’t believe the mess they made!”

“Wouldn’t I?”

Having cleaned the cow byre myself on numerous occasions, Dec could not be more mistaken. To hear him you’d think he’d never been down to the farm before instead of being a regular visitor. We have this discussion roughly twice a week.

“There was so much —”

“Dec!” warns Tom.

Dec turns his wide open blue eyes towards him.

“But, Uncle Tom, there was so much —”

“Dec.”

“Well there was,” mumbles Dec softly.
“I don’t doubt it, Dec.”

As they smile at each other I’m struck yet again by just how similar they are in looks. Their hair is the same wavy Jet black, and both of them have dark blue eyes. Yet it’s not just their colouring, their features are similar too. Dec’s are softened by youth but Tom’s are clear cut and strong, defined by hardship and responsibility. Even now Dec has many of Tom’s mannerisms. I look up to find Ricky staring past me, a vaguely pained expression on his face.

“Say, Deet?” He looks at me as if unsure how to go on. “Do we like really well done bacon, you know, like bordering on burnt?”

I wrench the frying pan from the range to find that, thankfully, it isn’t more than a little scorched.

“Hello, there seems to be a great many people in my kitchen.”

The professor’s myopic eyes travel around the room and alight on Tom.

“Awake already, my son?” His hand rests briefly on Tom’s shoulder, and I pass him a cup of tea. “Deetina, my cherished one: you are a gift.”

As he unwinds his scarf, I help him off with his coat.

“You’ve gotten way too cold, Uncle Jep.” I scold as we move into the lounge.

Uncle Jep slips into his wingback chair, and Tarri climbs up to take her customary position on his knee.

“And what have you been doing little one?”

Tarri recounts the events of the day so far as she leans against his shoulder, her chubby fingers playing with his watch chain. I bring the sandwiches through, circumnavigating the chairs, a plate in each hand. Ralph is trying to talk to me, but with Roydon on the floor playing chess with Dec, and keeping an eye on Carris lest she drop the plates she is handing out, I’m not really listening to him.

“Deeta! I bet you didn’t hear a word I said,” laughs Ralph.

“Sorry, Ralphie.” I smile back at him. “But you’re quite right: didn’t hear a word! Never mind though, it probably wasn’t important.”

Tom relieves me of the plates of sandwiches as Ralph tries to assault my middle. After several frantic seconds it is Ralph who ends up being assaulted, with a cushion, after which we settle down to eat.

“I was asking you if you’re going to the dance tonight, Deeta,” repeats Ralph.

“Yes, I always do,” I answer, watching as egg oozes from Tarri’s roll. “Hold your plate a little closer, Tarri… that’s right. Why do you ask, Ralphie?”

“Just wondering… are you coming with Nella?”

I am tempted to say several things that spring to my lips, but refrain. Ralph is rather keen on Nella you see, so I only nod.

“Just wondering.” Ralph turns his attention to his roll. I hide my urge to grin by biting my lip. Ralphie’s an unusual lad, a strange mix of boyish charm and maturity. At first he seems very much like Jamie, his brother. Both of them are built on massive lines, with curly dark blond hair. He’s more handsome than Jamie, I think, his face is broader and he has dimples. He’s hyper and somehow manages to make you feel happy and excited as well.

I must admit to feeling slightly anxious about his affection for Nell though. I think I told you that his brother, Jamie’s, overtures had been rejected by Nella. It caused a great stir at the time, and people still talk about it. Nell was rather emphatic, you see, and because so much was made of it, she can’t stand the sight of Jamie. It makes her uncomfortable to know that everyone is watching them. The trouble is her dislike of Jamie has carried over onto Ralph. I guess the similarities between them were too pronounced for her to give him a proper chance.
All of this Ralph knows, so he has never tried to pay her any particular attention. I just hope it doesn’t end badly. Fifty-eight floors is a pretty small world, there’s not really room to hide from embarrassment.

As I turn from my contemplation of Ralph, which I suppose must have lasted some time, my eyes meet Tom’s. There is something about his expression that causes the smile to slide from my face, and my gaze falters.

I hate it when he looks at me like that.

He never used too, but lately he has been doing it more and more. It’s not that his expression is disapproving precisely, but as though he is trying not to be disapproving.

Ralph has been telling a funny story, and the children laugh as he reaches the punch line. I think I envy Ralph. Despite everything, all his troubles, he still has the ability to laugh and to make others laugh too. He even makes Tom laugh and Tom has an unnerving habit of not even smiling at some peoples jokes, however funny they are.

Ralph is half way through his next story when, catching sight of the clock, a look of comic dismay enters his face and he jumps up from his seat. Amid profuse thanks for lunch, and tripping over the boys who are lying on the floor, he manages to reach the door and wrench it open. Pushing back the curls that have fallen forwards on to his forehead, he bids us good evening. He leaves the room as he always leaves a room: ringing with laughter.

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“You’re worried.”

I jump, almost poking my eye out with a hairgrip. Nella has been lounging on my bed for the last twenty minutes without addressing a word to me. It’s just like her to wait until I’m working with weaponised head gear to startle me.

“Nell, be careful! You almost blinded me!”

Nella raises herself on to her elbow, shaking back the glossy chestnut hair from her face.

“Don’t change the subject; why are you worried?”

“I always am when you and Tom go ‘out’.”

“I know, but this is different.”

There isn’t much point trying to hide how miserable I am from her. Yet I can’t explain the difference to myself, so how am I supposed to explain it to her? I shrug my shoulders and say nothing.

“I’m just tired I guess…” My voice trails off as though embarrassed at having voiced so pathetic an excuse.

I slip the last grip into my hair and pat it smooth. Nella, I know, isn’t satisfied. As she helps to zip up my faded dress her face wears an expression of faint concern.

“Nell, promise me you won’t be mean tonight.”

She looks surprised.

“I’m not usually.”

“Yes you are; you spend the whole night making cutting comments to poor lads who only want to dance with you. Sometimes I think that you spend the weeks that separate one party from another thinking of crushing one liners!”

She makes a small adjustment to my hair, stubborn inflexibility marring the beauty of her face.

“Any particular reason why I’m receiving this homily?”

“I thought it was obvious?”
Nella, meeting my eyes in the mirror, raises an eyebrow.
“Please don’t be unpleasant to Ralph.”
Nella’s fingers stiffen involuntarily amidst the curls she’s fixing in place.
“I wouldn’t say I was unpleasant to him,” she answers evenly.
“You don’t think your attitude is friendly, do you?”
Nella tucks her hair behind her ear and purses her lips.
“Nell, I’m not asking you to fawn all over him. I’m just asking you not to say the
first thing that comes into your head when you’re talking to Ralph, because invariably
it’s the most cutting thing you could say!”
Nella continues to look at me with that hard look in her eyes.
“Then I guess I’ll have to ignore the second, third, and fourth things too.”
“It’s awkward for me if you aren’t nice to him and besides; he’s never rude to you.”
Nella obviously hasn’t noticed this because she looks faintly surprised and her eyes
take on an unfocused expression. I can tell she’s trying to remember if this statement
is true.
“Where’s your locket?”
My hand flies to my neck, but the chain isn’t there.
Chapter Four

Deeta

The gesture is instinctive: I know where my locket is.
“I left it in the bathroom. Would you mind getting it for me?” I head to the wardrobe and take out my shoes. I’m pulling them on as Nella comes back into the room.
“You know; I thought you slept in this.” She laughs, running the platinum chain through her fingers. I laugh along with her, suddenly unwilling to admit that I do sleep in it when obviously she thinks that would be weird.
The necklace is very beautiful; its thick chain hangs to my waist with a large oval locket, delicately etched with an engraving inside. Uncle Jep thinks it’s Middle Eastern but he couldn’t translate the inscription. Tom gave it to me when I was fourteen after one of his trips ‘out’. I remember the night really clearly. Tom had come home tired and soaked to the bone, but with a grin like a Cheshire cat plastered across his face.
I had rarely taken the present off since, but wearing it in the bath was a no go. The locket part tended to fill with water and then leak over my clothes once I’d changed, hence its relegation to the bathroom shelf. I slip it over my head, and its familiar weight settles comfortably around my neck.
“Ready?” I ask.
Nella laughs and places her hands on her hips.
“If you remember, Deeta, I’ve been waiting for you for the best part of half an hour.”
Even as we enter the stairwell I can hear the faint hum of distant revelry. The night before the Guard goes out there is always a party. Everyone attends and it generally goes on until about two o’clock.
I don’t think I’ve ever stayed later than half past ten, that’s when I take the children down to bed. Professor Jepsjon usually comes with me, but Tom stays until the bitter end. Nella tells me that he spends most of the time talking to Ralph. I’m not sure but I think she vaguely resents it.
As we push into the dance hall the first thing I see is Keya and Jamie. I can hardly help it as they are the only two people on the dance floor, the rest of the party is enthusiastically clapping to the beat of the music. They are performing an energetic rock and roll routine, which I have to admit is very good. Keya is obviously enjoying herself; probably because her long legs are on almost constant display.
As they finish to the last strains of the song Nella and I clap along with the others. Couples again surge on to the floor, this time to rumba. Looking around I see Tarri, Carris, Dec, and Roydon playing tag. Uncle Jep is sitting at the card table in one corner, and I see Jan among the throng on the dance floor with one of the Trayman boys.
“I could do with a drink, Deet.”

We make our way to the refreshment area, and as we pour our drinks I see Tom. He’s leaning against the wall, laughing at something Ralph has just said to him. I catch his eye and wave.

“Come on, Nella, Tom’s just over there.”

As we make our way towards them Jamie springs up in front of us. Surprisingly he seems to have managed to escape from Keya, and as he appears I feel Nella take a sharp grip on my arm and drag me in front of her and between them both.

“Hi girls, having fun?”

I stammer a few disjointed words all the while wondering, in a strange mix of horror and amusement, what on earth he thinks he’s doing.

“I hope I get a dance with you both later,” he continues.

I revise my earlier opinion of him and decide he must be at least three cans short of a six pack.

“You might if you have a gun on you,” growls Nella.

Jamie looks faintly puzzled.

“I don’t quite… we aren’t allowed to bring guns in here.”

I place myself more firmly between them.

“Jamie, is that Keya calling you?”

Jamie jumps visibly, and looks over his shoulder.

“Hey girls, I just remembered I have somewhere I’m supposed to be. See ya later.”

“Oh, he has somewhere to be alright: the doctors are now ready to begin his lobotomy,” remarks Nella caustically. “Well I wish them luck finding a brain in that thick skull of his.”

Nella, woodenly aware that the eyes of the whole room are viewing her with great curiosity, propels me to where Tom is still lounging against the wall. His attention is no longer fixed on Ralph, but he watches us with an alert gleam in his eyes. Ralph has also observed proceedings. As we near, he hovers irresolute and greets us warily. He stands his ground, refusing to be pressured into leaving, but his stance is a little defensive. Tom also salutes us, but his eyes are on Nell. She gazes towards the dance floor, seemingly nonchalant, but her fingers restlessly pull on a waist length curl. Eventually she tosses it over her shoulder, and rests her hand on the hip of her red dress.

“It’s nice to see you in a dress, Nella, you look beautiful,” Ralph comments awkwardly.

“What a pity I can’t say the same for you.” Nella’s tone is sharp and she doesn’t even look at him as she makes the biting reply. Which is probably just as well. I see a faint inflection of hurt pass across Ralph’s features at her ill tempered barb, and feel myself colour in his defence. I can’t think of anything to say to ease the tension between them.

“Just as well: what man ever relished the epithet ‘beautiful’?” Tom asks, laughing easily and giving Ralph a playful push.

I expel a breath I hadn’t known I was holding, and slip my arm through Ralph’s. "You may not be beautiful, but you look rather dashing. I think I’ll let you dance with me. I was quite surprised you weren’t on the dance floor giving Jamie and Keya a run for their money.”

Ralph, recovering quickly, grins down at me.

“How could I, Deet? I was waiting for my best girl.”

“Oh and she stood you up? Poor Ralphie, you’ll have to make do with me.”

Ralph leads me on to the dance floor, chuckling.
“I pity the poor fool who tries to chat you up, Deet.”
“So do I, Ralphie.” I grimace. “Mum’ll have him married to me before he knows what hit him!”

Ralph is holding me in a light embrace, but at this his hands drop away from me. With a mock expression of harassment he starts to fumble in his pocket for something.
“If that’s the case you can hold on to the other end of that!” Ralph flutters a large white handkerchief in my direction.
“Thanks, Ralphie, how sweet of you to think of me.”
He grins, and takes me back into his arms.

Ralph dances very well, moving easily from a waltz into a quickstep as the music changes. He seems very comfortable pushing me around the floor, keeping up conversation with me that is littered with quick exchanges with others also on the dance floor.

Despite his cheerfulness I know that he is still thinking of Nella’s words.
“She didn’t mean it, Ralph, she was just flustered.”
Ralph shrugs his shoulders and expels a breath.
“Yes she did — no don’t… it’s alright, Deeta. She has no reason to like me — thanks to Jamie she has quite a good reason to dislike me.” His voice is resigned, not bitter. “And don’t go blaming Jamie, he’s a good guy.”

We dance in silence for a while. Over Ralph’s shoulder I see Tom talking to Nella. He seems to have soothed her ruffled feathers in a remarkably short space of time. The song finishes, and Ralph bows over my hand with a flourish.

“Nice one, Deet.” He grins, keeping hold of my hand and leads me from the floor, back to where Tom and Nella are leaning against the wall.

From the expression on Nell’s face I think Tom has made her feel bad about her flash of temper. She looks as though she’s going to try and make up for it, but before she can speak Ralph gives my hand a squeeze and excuses himself. I see him a moment later dancing with Jinny. Nella looks faintly relieved, and mutters something about the refreshment table, before moving away.

I look up at Tom, who in turn is watching the dance floor.
“What’s wrong?” he asks, his eyes never moving from the dancers.
“Nothing, I’m just glad you managed to make Ralphie feel better.”

“Nell’s got a sharp tongue on her hasn’t she? Then again, Ralph should have known not to say that.”
“He said the first thing that came into his head.”
“Foolish of him.” For the first time Tom turns to look at me. “You look pretty, Deeta. Nice chain.”

I twist my fingers through its length.
“What, this old thing?”
Tom catches my hand in his.
“Careful.” He warns as we move into the crush on the dance floor. “Or I might not bring you a present back this time!”

I enjoy dancing with Tom. He doesn’t make you feel like he’s invading your personal space, though I suppose that is precisely what he is doing. As his comment registers the music fades, and his words echo ominously in my ears. I feel a familiar sensation of sickening fear close over me, bringing me out into a cold sweat.

Tomorrow morning my father, Tom, Nella, and Pip will all be ‘out’. Who knew what dangers they would be facing? How many times could I expect them to come home when death is the way of the world outside our peaceful compound?
I guess Tom feels me stiffen, because he looks down at me sharply almost as though he knows the turn of my thoughts. Gently he pulls me closer to him and I know that in the crush of the dance floor, it is a move that will go unnoticed. I allow myself to accept the comfort of his embrace in the spirit it is offered; in brotherly affection.

It’s something of a shock when the music stops and Tom releases me. I’m comforted by the fact that there is regret in his manner, as though he is sorry to let me go.

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The party goes on and I spend most of it dancing. I’m just beginning to develop a headache when Jamie, true to his threat, pops up beside me demanding a turn about the floor. He doesn’t really wait for me to answer him, but pulls me into the throng.

I am nervous as we begin dancing; this is the first time I’ve ever partnered Jamie. He proves surprisingly easy to follow, and I begin to relax.

“Tell me, Deeta, is your dislike of me because of your friend or is there something else?”

If it wasn’t for the fact that he has a pretty good grip on me, I would have stumbled. I stammer disjointedly for quite a while before he takes pity on me.

“It’s okay, Deeta, there’s no need to beat about the bush.”

“I don’t dislike you!” I reply quickly, blushing.

“I’m relieved, we don’t really operate in the same sphere do we?” He nods. “I guess you don’t know very much about me, but I know quite a lot about you though.”

For one hideous moment I think that my worst nightmare is coming true; that Jamie Clark is taking a romantic interest in me. Perhaps he sees the wild panic in my eyes, because he laughs. His laugh is so much like Ralphie’s that I relax again, smiling with him.

“That’s better; you’re lovely when you smile.”

I blush awkwardly and ask him if he likes Charles Dickens.

“Can’t say as I’ve ever met him,” he returns with a shrug. “Not keen on compliments are you, Deeta? Keya sees them as her due.”

“Seeing as she’s so beautiful, I suppose they are. Complements embarrass me.”

“You know, Deeta, I asked you to dance for a particular reason.”

“You mean other than my lovely smile?” My voice is a shade tarter than I had intended, and he laughs again.

“Direct hit, Deeta, well done. No more buttering up; you obviously don’t like the flavour. I’ll get straight to the point; I wonder if you could persuade Nella not to be quite so repulsed by me?”

I must have made to break away from him because his hands tighten, ruthlessly holding me in place.

“Gently, Deeta, gently. I’m not trying to fix my interest with her but Ralph’s.” His grip remains tight, holding me firmly in place.

“I think Deeta has had enough, Jamie.” Tom’s voice is very quiet and his hand moves to catch Jamie’s wrist in a painful grip.

“I think that you’re right, she does look unwell. Perhaps you’d better sit down, Deeta,” continues Tom, as if answering some comment on Jamie’s part. He takes my arm and leads me from the floor with a curt command made to Jamie in an undertone to come too. I’m rather surprised when that is precisely what Jamie does.

Tom settles me in a chair, courteously asking me how I am again, and presses the drink that Ralph has ready into my hand. I reflect that Tom must have had the forethought to send him for it before coming to rescue me. As I sip at the cooling
liquid, aware that sympathetic eyes are on me, I cringe. I only hope I look sufficiently ill to make Tom’s cover-up look real. Over my head the boys are diagnosing me. I think they’ve decided that I’m over heated. Before long Tom is again crouching down beside me.

“I think you’d better go now, Deeta. If you could take the children and tell Uncle Jep the time, I’d be grateful.”

His voice is quiet, but holds an undertone of command that experience has taught me not to ignore. I stand and bid Ralph and Jamie goodnight, before going in search of the children and Uncle Jep. If I tell the truth I’m rather relieved that I have an excuse to leave. My headache has worsened and, from the look of Tom, things are going to be uncomfortable for Jamie. Tom won’t be unpleasant or give Jamie a slap down or anything. Tom has far more subtle ways of making a person wish the floor would open up and swallow them.

The children take the news that it is bedtime tolerably well. All seem happy, if a little tired, and I’m treated to a re-enactment of how Dec won at musical chairs. When we reach the Jepsjons’ apartment Tarri settles herself into the professor’s arms, while I see the other children washed and changed.

Carris settles down to sleep readily, but the boys’ room is in a state of uproar. Ricky watches indulgently over his book as Roydon and Dec jump up and down on their bed’s, pillow fighting with much fervour. It takes me a full fifteen minutes to coax them into bed.

When I return to the sitting room I find Uncle Jep singing to Tarri in Polish. The soft and sweet melody is one I can remember him singing to me at her age. I don’t interrupt the idyllic picture they make, but go to the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

As I wait for the kettle to boil, I think of all that happened at the party. As unpleasant as my dance with Jamie had been, now I think about it I’m intrigued by what he said. Maybe I’m wrong in thinking he’s a little thick. He seems to be aware of Ralph’s feelings for Nella, even though I know that Ralph wouldn’t tell anyone about it. That means that Jamie must have guessed.

I can even explain away his actions with me on the dance floor. If I had managed to break away from him I would probably have left him there, creating a scene much like the one he was trying to patch up with Nella.

Tarri is leaning drowsily against Uncle Jep, a hand snuggled under her chin, when I take the tea in.

“She is much like you were, Deetina,” says Uncle Jep as I put his tea on the table beside him. “You also wished always to be embraced.”

“I haven’t grown out of it.”

Tarri is warm and relaxed as I lift her into my arms. She’ll be asleep as soon as her head touches the pillow, I think to myself. It turns out I am wrong. When I crouch down to tuck her covers around her, one arm creeps around my neck. Pulling my head close to hers, Tarri threads the fingers of her other hand into my curls.

“Aunty Deet, why is Uncle Tom going away tomorrow?”

“He’s going to bring us some things we need from the City,” I reply. “Don’t worry; he’ll be back again soon.”

“Will he, Aunty Deet? Sometimes people go out and they don’t come back.” Her voice is tremulous, and I give her soft cheek a kiss.

“It would take a great deal to keep Uncle Tom away from you and the rest of us.” Tarri thinks about this for awhile.

“Aunty Deet, can’t we do without the things they’re going to get?”
I cast about my mind for a suitable answer but, as I have often thought the very same thing, nothing presents itself.

“If we could, it wouldn’t be much fun.”
I jump at the sound of Tom’s voice, and listen as he pulls himself upright from the doorjamb he’s leaning against. He comes to kneel next to me by Tarri’s bed.

“Don’t worry, Tarri. I always come back, don’t I?” He reaches out to tweak one of her dusky curls, smiling at her gently. “Come on, it’s time short people were asleep.”

He pulls the covers back around her and kisses her cheek.

“Night, Uncle Tom and Aunty Deet.”

“Night, mush,” replies Tom. He pulls me up from my sitting position on the floor, his hand warm on my arm.

“You’re freezing, Deeta, you’d better sit by the fire for a bit. I’ve got something to tell you.”

Tom hands me one of his jumpers, and I pull it on thankfully as he picks up his mug of tea. He waits, leaning on the back of Uncle Jep's chair, for me to settle myself comfortably.

I don’t tell him that it’s not just the cool air that is making me shiver. It’s the thought of my father, Tom, Pip, and Nella not coming back that’s to blame for my trembling.

“I had a little talk with Jamie. Apparently he is aware of Ralph’s feelings for Nell, and he’s trying to help.”

“I kind of thought that was what he was trying to tell me, after I considered it for a while.”

“Yes, well. Jamie, being something of a hands on man, showed a spectacular lack of tact. I told him it might help more if he didn’t try, but allowed nature to take its own course.”

“You’re right.” I nod. “He would only succeed in making Nell dislike him more.”

I look around the room toward the clock and, after taking in the time, manage to feign surprise.

“If that’s the time, I’d better go.” I stand up and kiss Uncle Jep goodnight, but as I turn to Tom he shakes his head.

“I’ll see you down.”

He opens the door and, as I pass through, says something in polish to Professor Jepsjon. We have navigated the first flight of stairs before Tom, taking hold of my arm, pulls me to a stop.

“What’s wrong, Deeta? Why did you want to get away?”

Knowing that if I talk about my fears I’ll cry, I pull away.

“I’m tired, that’s all. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

He makes no move to touch me again, but looks at me for a long moment.

“You don’t have to tell me, Deeta, but don’t fob me off with a load of rubbish.”
I think I stand there looking up at him miserably for a whole minute before I start to cry. Even then he makes no move to touch me, to comfort me, because he offered once and was refused. If I want his sympathy now I’ll have to ask for it. “What if you, Dad, Pip, and Nell don’t come back Tom? What then?”

I lean my head against his shoulder, feeling his arms move around me. We stand like that for a while before he releases me and speaks again. “Hanky, Deeta?”

A search through my pockets turns up nothing, so Tom gives me his own. He keeps one arm flung loosely around my shoulders as we walk the rest of the way to my door. “Get inside and get some sleep. Didn’t you hear what I told Tarri? Short people should be in bed by now, that goes for you too.”

His grin is full of camaraderie, and he pats my cheek like Uncle Jep does. “I promise you, Deeta, we’ll all come home safe and sound.”

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Tom has left when I go up to make breakfast the next morning, and the children are unusually subdued. I have greenhouse duty again today, and Professor Jepsjon school to teach this morning which all the children will be attending.

So it happens that I pass the morning quite lonely, and have the uncomfortable luxury of plenty of time to dwell on my own thoughts. Despite Tom’s promise I’m still uneasy. With Nell it’s not so bad, as a woman she will be given more protection. Tom will not.

In fact, I have an uncomfortable feeling that he will take the most dangerous assignments himself, simply as a matter of course.

The first day of Tom’s absence passes quietly. By the second day the children have recovered their bounce, and the house is rowdy until they leave to pursue more scholarly activities in the classroom. Spending most of the night worrying about the others who are ‘out’ has taken its toll on me. Before eleven o’clock is reached, I have what promises to be a blinding headache.

Having already tidied the house, washed the bedding, and baked enough food for the five thousand, I sit in Tom’s armchair with a cup of tea. The vain hope that a moment’s rest and the drink will scare my headache off is not strong, but nevertheless I pursue it.

I’m not sure how it happens, but the next thing I’m aware of is the faintly groggy feeling you get when you’ve been woken from sleep quickly. A glance at the clock tells me that forty minutes have gone by. Yet the room is still silent, with no noise to rouse me from what had obviously been a deep sleep. I stand up and meet my own eyes in the mirror above the fireplace. I’m staring at myself in a dazed kind of way, when I realise that mine is not the only figure reflected in its polished surface.

I suppose it must have been the second time he walked through the room, and the first time he didn’t notice me curled up in the depths of the large arm chair. He seems quite as shocked as I am to find he’s not alone.

A full second elapses before I utter a strangled scream and leg it through the door and into the passage way. The first thing I come across is another camouflaged figure and my panic ratchets up a notch. I think of the children who, in about fifteen minutes time, will joyfully be free of the shackles of their lessons. The only way to go is up, as the two soldiers are behind me, so I run up the stairs. All the time the knowledge that I am leading the intruders towards the children, rings in my head. With the sound of pursuit hideously loud in the stairwell, coherent thought is proving difficult. I’m half
way up the forth flight when I hear Dec’s jubilant voice proclaiming himself the winner of some unseen race.

“Dec, run!” My voice cracks and my throat, already sore, tightens.

Dec’s voice exclaiming above my head is cut short as he sees my pursuers. I hear the door onto the stairwell open and close above me, and a moment later something hits the floor behind me with a dull thud. A cheer reverberates around the walls.

Dec, bless him, hadn’t run away when I told him to. Instead he’d brought a large book from the school room above, and hurled it at one of my attackers. As that soldier is, at this very moment, out cold on the steps, I guess his aim must have been pretty accurate.

The last of the men is felled by some sort of encyclopaedia, this time lobbed by Roydon. I reach the landing they are standing on, completely out of breath. Roydon and Dec seize a hand each, and drag me after Ricky. Ricky has Tarri in his arms and Carris’ hand is tucked in his.

From the direction in which they are going I think their destination is Ralph’s house. Unfortunately we keep running into the strangers that have breached the building, and our efforts bring us almost full circle. We come to a standstill in one of the rooms with a connecting door, and pause breathlessly.

“Who are they?” whispers Roydon.

“I don’t know, but they have some pretty neat kit,” answers Ricky. He relinquishes Tarri into Carris’s arms, and places his ear to the door. “Ssh — someone’s coming!”

Ricky steps back a little from the door, and we all wait expectantly. Sure enough it begins to open slowly. Ricky waits until it is almost half way open before he kicks it shut with all his might. We turn and run though the connecting door, in to the room on the other side, and through to the corridor beyond. We’re so tantalisingly close to Ralph’s house.

How it happens I hardly know, but as Dec passes the school room he’s dragged kicking and screaming through the door by unseen hands. I scream and pull on the handle but it won’t move. I realise they must have locked it behind them. Ralph’s door is just a little further on, and I grab Ricky’s arm.

“Ricky, take the children to Ralph and stay with him.”

“But…”

I don’t know what he had been going to say, but he stops abruptly and nods.

As I turn and run down the hallway I hear the children banging on the Clark’s door. There is no sign of Dec when I enter the school room, but from the knocked over chairs it’s obvious that there has been a struggle. I run through the next two rooms desperately and hear, in the distance, Dec’s voice raised in protest. I burst into the corridor to find him struggling madly with one of the camouflaged soldiers. Picking up a stool from the room I’ve just come through, I use it to hit the man around the head. He sinks to the floor moaning, and I take Dec’s hand. We run down the passage, around the corner and up the steps, slap bang into more of the soldiers.

Instinctively I push Dec behind me. Below their visors I see derision in the men’s smirks, and when they step forwards they pull us apart easily. Trying to tear away from the vice like grip on my arm, I pull my knee up into the soldier’s stomach. His smirk changes quickly to a snarl of pain, and my struggles become more desperate. I manage to free an arm long enough to punch him in the face. I must admit to a feeling of gratification as blood begins to trickle from his nose.

There is blinding pain as his fist connects with my face, slapping it sharply sideways and causing me to lurch backwards. I fall to the floor, and it’s only Dec screaming my name that brings me groggily to my feet. I am rewarded by a merciless grip on my
arm, forcing it behind me and well up my back as the soldier drives me heavily into
the wall. I slip to the floor weakly, again hearing Dec’s voice calling to me. The
sound grows gradually fainter, until my eyes close and I hear nothing.

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My first conscious thought is that my head might split in two. Someone
immeasurably kind is bathing my face with cold water. The nausea brought on by its
fiery hotness fades a little, and I open my eyes experimentally. Uncle Jep sits next to
me, and over his shoulder I can see Ralph. He is holding Tarri in his arms, and Carris
clings tightly to his leg. Both girls have been crying.
“Be still, little one.”
“Uncle Jep, Dec...”
Professor Jepsjon shakes his head.
“You must be silent, Deetina. We could not find Dec: did you?”
Tears well up in my eyes, and I feel them spilling over in scalding droplets down my
cheeks.
“They took him, Uncle Jep... I couldn’t stop them, I tried...”
“Ssh, Deetina. If you did not stop them, neither did we.”
“The other kids?”
“Ralph kept them safe.”
I close my eyes.
Dec gone... It doesn’t seem possible, yet I’d seen it with my own eyes. What did they want with him? If only Tom were here...
Tom.
What would he say when he came home and found Dec gone? The nausea that had
receded comes back in full force.
“She looks too pale.”
My mother’s voice is quiet, she’s obviously talking to Uncle Jep. I hadn’t noticed
her presence in the room, but the knowledge that she’s here is a comfort. I feel a
warm blanket spread over me, and realise that I’m shivering.
“Perhaps something stronger than tea?” asks the professor.
“I think so,” returns my mother softly. “How do you feel, darling?”
I can’t really think of anything but the fact that Dec is gone, yet I’m aware that my
face is bruised and swollen, and that I can’t move my right arm.
“I hurt.”
“If I ever lay my hands on the swine that did this...” Her voice, filled with
suppressed fury, is suspended with tears.
“What else did they take?” I ask.
My mother doesn’t answer. When I shift my head painfully to look at her, it’s to see
a worried frown has settled on her features.
“They didn’t take anything else.”
My mind dumbly seems unable to except this fact, and dwells on it stupidly without
really taking it in.
They came for Dec... why?
My mother is talking soothingly in the background, but her words don’t penetrate
the fog around my brain.
Why?
The question, neon lit and flashing, pushes all other thoughts from my brain. I must
ask out loud as Ralph answers my question, his voice rough with emotion.
“I don’t know, Deet, I just don’t know.”
“We’ll talk about this tomorrow, Deeta, not now. You need to sleep… no don’t argue with me. I know it will be hard, but you have to be brave.”
Uncle Jep arrives with a steaming cup.
“Come, Deetina, my precious one. I have made you a hot toddy; I know how much you dislike drinking whisky neat.”
He slips his arm around me, pulling me upright so that I can rest my head on his shoulder. Carefully avoiding my hurt arm, he holds the mug to my lips. Fire courses down my throat, and straight into my veins.
“Uncle Jep,” I gasp hoarsely. “That must have been five parts whisky to water!”
“But in a moment you will feel much better, my dear.”
He turns to my mother.
“You will leave her with me, will you not? It would be a pity to move her.”
My mother agrees after a few moments that it would be the most sensible option, even though it makes it impossible for her to stay with me.
“I wish my husband were here.”
“If it comes to that, I wish that my boy were here,” answers Uncle Jep.
The whisky is beginning to take effect, and I feel my eyelids drooping. As I hear this whispered confidence, I struggle and mutter tiredly.
“Tom will be so angry with me…”
The next second I have fallen into a fitful sleep.

I wake up next to hear the pleasant sound of the fire crackling merrily in the fire place. The room is in darkness except for its orange glow, shadows flickering in and out of focus. My face, which has been steadily throbbing, is even more achy than ever. I stir restlessly and find that my arm is no longer numb; it has come painfully to life. I moan softly.
“Are you in much pain, Deetina?”
Uncle Jep materialises from the shadows to stand at my side. I take his proffered hand gratefully and hold on to it tight.
“Uncle Jep.”
Somehow I can’t say any more and, though it is immeasurably painful, I find myself crying again. With his free hand he brings a cool cloth against the burning heat of my face. It brings blissful relief and I tell him so. He stays silent for a long time before hesitantly speaking.
“You are worried that Tomasz will blame you for what happened to Dec, aren’t you, Deeta?” His voice holds a worried inflection. “He would not be so unjust, how could you think that of him?”
“But, Uncle Jep, I was there… I saw it all and I still couldn’t stop them!”
“Deetina, that is precisely why he will never blame you. One cannot do the impossible; you could not have saved Dec any more than he could save himself.”
The cool cloth is again pressed gently against my face, and Uncle Jep’s other hand strokes my hair lightly.
“You wish to tell me of it?”
“There isn’t much to tell, all I remember is hazy. I know that there were a lot of them; we kept bumping into them as we tried to run away. I don’t think… wait! Dec and Roydon knocked two out in the stairwell!” I remember.
“Yes, Roydon said, but they were not there when we searched for them.”
“Who do you think they were?”

“It is not for me to say,” answers Uncle Jep.

No, I suppose it’s not for anyone to say. I watch the firelight casting dancing lights over the ceiling. More than anything I wish that Tom were here. If he was I know that things wouldn’t seem so desperate; Tom would think of something. Yet I can’t help thinking that it’s unfair to expect him to fix everything, it seems far too broken for that.

I thought that things could not get worse; that in losing Dec I had reached a low that could not be surpassed.

I was wrong.

Tom didn’t come home that night, as he had been scheduled to do. The Guard didn’t return to the compound the next night, or the night after that. Those empty days brought anxiety and new fear. Perhaps Dec was lost forever, and somehow my father, Nell, Tom, Philip, and the others had been lost too.

Clare was a curiously absent figure from my bedside, and I didn’t need anyone to tell me the reason why. My own mind was tortured by the same thoughts that were torturing her. I, however, could only imagine the despair she must be feeling at the thought that she had lost the man with whom she was to spend her life.
Chapter Six

Deeta

I hear the bustle long before they reach the door. Ralph, who has been making a valiant attempt to cheer me, lapsed into despondent silence a few minutes ago. I struggle into sitting position hoping that the disturbance heralds the Guards arrival back at the compound. The wait seems endless, and Ralph reaches out to take my hand in a painful grip.

The door is wrenched open long before the sound reaches our floor. Tom stands on the threshold, an out of breath Nella close behind him. He doesn’t move from his position just inside the door. Nella pushes past him and falls to her knees beside me on the chair Ralph and I are sitting on.

“Deet, honey, are you okay?” She doesn’t wait for my answer, but traces a gentle finger down my bruised cheek. “What have they done to you?” Her soft voice holds a faint inflection of horror.

Her face is already wet with tears, and I realise that she must have cried the moment she was told. I’ve hardly cried at all since that night with uncle Jep. Now, with her arms around me, I feel tears beginning to gather.

“They’ve taken Dec, Nell… they just took him. And then you all didn’t come home and I thought… I thought…” My voice trails off, suppressed by sobs.

Nella’s arm around my waist squeezes me a little.

“We had a slight problem.” She turns to look uncertainly at Tom. He seems to awaken from his trance, and moves into the room. The whole tribe seems to file in after him.

“Why did you take so long?” asks Mr. Clark.

The question is directed at Jamie who has just entered, but his son doesn’t seem to hear him. He walks the length of the room and sinks down onto one of the chairs, his legs buckling underneath him. Before our astonished gaze his head sinks into his hands, and the room goes silent. Mr. Clark turns from his son to Tom.

“We have much to talk about, but everyone must be here,” states Tom quietly.

He stands, hands clasped behind his back, in front of the fire. It strikes me that he is in complete control of the situation, he looks powerful and decisive. His calmness eases the tense atmosphere in the room, bringing some semblance of order to the panic. He calls Nella to him with a small gesture, and for a moment they converse quietly. When their discussion is over she leaves the room, sending a reassuring smile in my direction. The subdued murmuring in the room suddenly comes to an abrupt halt as Mr. Reynolds steps forwards.

“What is going on, Tomasz?”

Tom, his gaze again trained on me, makes a dismissive gesture.
“Not until everyone is here. In the meantime I’d like to know what happened here, sir.” He looks towards uncle Jep.

Professor Jepsjon lays the bare facts before him quickly and clearly.

“And then Ricky came to find me to tell me where the children were, and that Ralph had gone to find Deeta and Dec. It was half an hour before Ralph returned with Deeta unconscious in his arms, and the news that Dec had not been with her,” finishes uncle Jep.

“Ralph found her?”

The professor nods.

“Yes, he has been a great help to me in looking after her and the children.”

Tom asks a rapid question in Polish which the professor answers lengthily in the same language. I’m uneasily aware of the bitterness in Tom’s voice. I’d expected he would be angry, but I’d not imagined him as angry as this. Tom doesn’t lose his temper like most people; he doesn’t shout or bash things about. As horrible as it is when someone completely loses control, Tom’s anger is somehow worse. He doesn’t become abusive, and he certainly doesn’t become violent, but his voice gets very cold and very soft. Against your will you find yourself straining to hear his every word, even though listening to what he says is one of the most uncomfortable things you will ever go through.

Yet even his anger is nothing to the pain and distress that I see in his eyes. They burn with some nameless and powerful emotion that I can’t place. Watching his torment is painful and I slip from my seat, creeping into the girls’ room. There are books everywhere, attestations to the trouble Jan has been taking in trying to occupy their minds. I kneel on the floor, replacing the battered tomes on the bookshelf.

“Are you alright?”

I jump violently at the sound of Tom’s voice.

“Apparently not.”

He sits beside me on the floor, turning my face towards him so that he can inspect my cheek and sling. I already know that the bruising is spectacular; it spreads over one cheekbone in purple and blue glory. My arm is similarly colourful but no longer so stiff and sore.

Tom brushes his finger gently over my skin.

“Poor Deetina, what have they done to you?” His voice is soft and full of sympathy.

I think it is his kindness that breaks me down, and I tip forwards into his arms. A feeling of immeasurable comfort floods from him to me as his embrace closes around me.

“I’m sorry, Tom, so sorry!” The words come out between choking sobs. “I couldn’t stop them… I tried but I couldn’t, they were determined to take him.” I break off, pulling back to look at him. “You understand don’t you, Tom? They wanted him, no one else but Dec.”

“It’s alright, Deeta, don’t cry.”

Tom’s fingers move gently among my curls.

“Why, Tom? Why would they want him… he’s just a little boy?”

“Deeta, I have something to tell you.” He pauses until I’ve wiped my tears away with my sleeve. “I know who took Dec… no don’t say anything just listen. It was the Andak.”

For several seconds I stare at him in disbelief.

“What could they possibly want with Dec? How could…”

“They want him because he belongs to them: Dec is Andak,” Tom breaks in softly, releasing my arms. “So am I.”
My heart misses a beat and then begins to thud uncomfortably, as though trying to make it up. Tom’s eyes search my face intently, trying to answer some strange enigma.

“My father’s name was Paul Andak. His father was an American business tycoon and his mother was from the Emirate states. He was brought up with every luxury. He went to the best schools and eventually went into the family business: hedge funds. He saw the banking crisis coming; finances were so tangled, it was so much money and it had all happened before. He said that all the while people thought they could make millions, however risky it was, they did it.

“But they went too far. Everything was interlinked so deeply that they couldn’t afford one bank to go down for fear it would take them all down. They kept bailing out the banks that were in trouble, even though they knew it was only a stalling tactic for the inevitable crash. He knew that when that crash came money would be worthless. The real assets would be those that sustained life: clean water, food, and electricity. He used to say that money was the ultimate confidence trick, and he was surprised it lasted as long as it did.

“He knew that the worst hit would be the cities. People would begin to starve, and without electricity they would have no clean water. Anyone who had those things would become a target for looters… if they didn’t protect themselves. And that was how his big idea began. He built a state of the art compound which was self sufficient and luxurious, then marketed it to the rich and famous as a bolt hole should anything happen. Nuclear war, dirty bomb, pandemic — anything, all provided of course, that you could pay.”

He breaks off looking down at his hands.

“My father was a bad man. He had no intention of helping people who couldn’t help him. The only people who didn’t have to pay for their place inside the compound, had to work for it instead. He realised that the tribe would expand, and the compound would need to grow with it. He had a cross section of experts from all walks of life brought in to work inside the compound. Scientists, builders, architects, electricians, even weavers. He brought them into the compound and explained the complex away to prying eyes as a research university. Then he made his own little army to defend the compound when the time came. It would be the perfect little empire — and he would be king.”

“What happened?”

“Everything he said would happen did, and I don’t have the slightest doubt that he helped it along,” answers Tom bitterly. “He made his way through six wives, produced sixteen sons and six daughters, and lived like a king. Yet even kings die. He became ill, and that’s when he started to get afraid. What would happen to his kingdom, his magnificent empire that he had spent so long securing for himself? Seventeen sons between six different women. The best scenario that he could see was that they would split it between themselves, but who would settle for a slice when they could have the whole thing? Dax was eldest son, but there was no saying if the sons’ of his later wives would submit to Dax’s rule. He decided it would be more likely that his sons would tear the tribe apart with their greed.”

“So what did he do?” My voice, softly prompting, brings Tom back from his bitter revere.

“He set up a council to rule over the complex as a unit. Every brother would have a seat on the board that he could pass on to his eldest son. That way it was in everyone’s interest to be out for himself. They wouldn’t risk backing one brother against another and hoping for a powerful position when the dust settled, they had too
much to lose. It at one and the same time he strengthened each son’s position and weakened it.” He looks up and into my eyes. “I said he wasn’t a very nice man, not that he wasn’t clever. It could have worked.”

“Why didn’t it?”

“Because one of my brothers thought he could have it all anyway. I was eight when my father died, my brother Rye was eleven. Our mother died when I was four and I don’t recall much about her. Rye and I had lived with my father and his sixth wife, Jesminda for as long as I could remember. When I was nine she remarried. My father’s eldest son, Dax, insisted that I lived with him, his wife, and their three girls. Rye was enrolled in the army by then and lived in the barracks.

Seven months after my father’s death, my brother Roland died in an ambush. A few months later my brother Ethan died. Dax had been suspicious enough about Roland’s death, but after Ethan he was sure that these so called ‘accidents’ were way too convenient. He thought that one of us was deliberately dispatching the rest until he had gained sole leadership of the tribe. It was a belief that he shared only with Mari and I.”

“Who is Mari?”

“Dax’s wife.”

“Why not tell everyone else?”

“Because he had no idea who the culprit was. The council had only been running for seven months, and we were still trying to forge relationships with brothers we barely knew. When our father re-married his sons continued to live with their mother. Full brothers like Rye and me live together, but apart from our half siblings. I first met Dax when I was six: before then I didn’t even know I had brothers other than Rye. We had no interaction with each other until the council was established and drew us together.”

“How come you’re here with us instead of with your own tribe?”

“Dax figured that, out of all the brothers, I would be the easiest to dispatch. I was just a kid so I was more vulnerable, so he sent me to be a sleeper in another tribe.”

“A sleeper?”

“I would be a member of the Andak tribe but would live as a member of another tribe. That way if the time came when the Andak needed the help of the other tribes in the City, their help would be easier attained by the fact that they already knew and trusted an Andak. I visit my own tribe roughly five times a year; I have to because I have a place on the council. When I’m not there Dax, and after him Rye, had the responsibility of casting my vote.

“On one of my visits home I found out that Mari, who had been with child, had delivered a little boy. Dax was out of his mind with worry for the child. He knew that if anything happened to him, Dec would inherit his father’s place on the board and with it a death sentence. So he decided that Dec would be safer with me and Uncle Jep, and sent Dec with me when I left to return here.

“We didn’t tell anyone what we were doing; we led them to believe that Dec had been kidnapped. I never told my brothers which tribe I had settled with, Dax wouldn’t even let me tell him where I was staying. He said that it was safer if I was the only one who knew.”

I try to take his words in, but feel too numb to comprehend everything he’s saying. It couldn’t be true. Tom couldn’t be Andak. Dec couldn’t share blood with that tribe of monsters. I start to shake. I feel like I’m drowning under the deluge of Tom’s revelations.
“So you’re telling me that you – you’re some kind of Andak Elder? And Dec is…”
A thought hits me, and I look up into Tom’s dark blue eyes. They are exactly the
same shade as Dec’s. “You really are Dec’s uncle!”
He nods.
“But… I don’t understand. What about Dec’s parents? Don’t they want to know
their son? Don’t they care about him? How could they just send him away like that?”
“There was too much danger; can’t you see that they didn’t have a choice?”
Tom breaks off abruptly, and his eyes look right through me at a picture that I can’t
see. When he finally does speak his words are so soft I hardly hear them.
“When I returned for my next visit Dax was dead.”
“Dead! They killed him?” My hand flies to Tom’s wrist. “And now they have Dec!
Tom we have to get him back, you can get him back can’t you? I mean you’re their
brother they have to…”
“Deeta, what sort of reaction do you think I’ll get when I walk into the council, and
Dec shouts ‘Uncle Tom’? He isn’t supposed to have seen me since he was a newborn.
What do you think will be running through my brothers’ heads? All these years I’ve
kept him from them, not told him who he really is. Don’t you think they’ll be
suspicious of me?” His eyes plead with me to understand, and I feel the sudden aching
inability to swallow.
“What are you going to do, Tom, what are you trying to tell me?” My hand tightens
on his until I see the knuckles stand out white.
“They’ll kill me, Deeta,” answers Tom. “They’ll believe that I killed Dax and
Roland, all of them. They’ll think that I’m the one trying to kill them all to gain
absolute power!”
“They couldn’t, Tom,” I gasp. “Why would they, you’re their brother! How could
they even think that you could be…”
“Because one of us is! One of us is guilty. When they find that Dec has been here
with me for all this time, they’ll shoot first and ask questions later!”
“And they have Dec.” I sob, tears beginning to course down my face.
“Don’t worry about Dec, he’ll be safe enough,” answers Tom. “At the moment he’s
far too high profile for any harm to come to him. He won’t be in danger from the
killer until the excitement has died down and everyone isn’t keeping such a keen eye
on him.”
“That’s not what I mean, Tom.” I brush away my tears with the back of my hand. “I
mean that — that they have Dec…” My disgusted voice trails off. I can’t seem to put
my fears into words, probably because I’m not sure what my fears are.
The Andak are evil. Ever since I was a small child I have heard the whispers, the
stifled gasps, and the repulsion with which the Andak are mentioned. It’s as though
they are some kind of plague, so my horror is linked with the fact that Dec is now in
their midst.
“They aren’t like that, Deeta.” Tom moves uncomfortably. “I know that you’ve been
told that they’re debauched and depraved, but they aren’t. I won’t say that they’re
without faults, they have enough of them, but they aren’t like the stories, nothing like.
It’s just that people are scared of them, of their power and the fact that apart from the
stories no one seems to know very much about them. No one likes to be in the dark
like that, and I guess every time those old stories are told they’re embellished a little
more. I doubt whether even the originators of those old stories would recognise them
now.”
“But, Tom, they wiped out the Kelly tribe! They destroyed them and their compound in a single night. How can you say that isn’t evil, how can you tell me that they’re no worse than anyone else?”

“I’m not, I wouldn’t try,” answers Tom with feeling. “And you’re right it was evil, but it also wasn’t the Andak.”

“No one in this City has the power to do anything like that, no one but the Andak.”

“No one in this City,” replies Tom with heavy emphasis. “We aren’t the only city left in the world, Deeta. Ever since the breakdown the Andak have protected this City, and the tribes within its boundaries, from the hostile advances of the Lewises. The Lewises are from the lands outside the boundary of the City.

“When the crash happened, the military base that was near the town took over. They don’t have tribes, Deeta, they have a tribe, singular. If you’re not keen on being part of that tribe then you get a bullet to the head.” Tom rakes a hand through his black hair. “The amount of times I’ve heard some foul action on the Lewis’s part blamed on the Andak, blamed on the very people, the only people, who can stop the Lewises!

“Why do you think that there is so much fighting in the City? Do you really think that the tribes have enough time and energy left over after a hard day, just trying to survive, to go out and pick a fight with one another?”

“But the skirmishes, you don’t mean…”

“For the most part they are between the Lewis army and the Andak guard.”

For a second I let his words sink in and one thought, rising doggedly from the surrounding jumble, surges to the fore front of my brain.

“Tara?”

I see a fleeting spasm of pain cross Tom’s features.

“We ran straight into a standoff between Andak guards and Lewis soldiers. Tara was caught in the cross fire.”

A soft rap on the closed door startles us both. Nella sticks her head into the room.

“Tom, they’re all here.”

“Thanks, Nell.” Tom gets to his feet, pulling me up after him. He keeps hold of my hand, staring down at our entwined fingers for a moment.

“Deeta, do me a favour? Sit next to Mrs. Green would you?”

A quick look at his face tells me that his confidences have come to an end. He is no longer Tom my friend, but has become Tom the soldier. I nod and Tom ushers me into the lounge.

The room is overcrowded, and with the heat from the fire, stifling and airless as well. Ralph is standing next to Jamie, as Tom enters he shakes his head. I think the gesture is in regard to Jamie, but I can’t be sure. Nella has gone to sit next to Uncle Jep at the left of the fire, I make my way to be with Mrs. Green as requested.

As Tom takes his stand in front of the fire the room is frozen in stillness. I find it strangely chilling and ominous, like a lull before a storm. It is Tom who breaks the silence, who seems to be the only one free from the strange spell that holds us all powerless in its grip.

“On returning home from our latest expedition I was confronted with the information that, in the Guards absence, our building had been breached and Dec Jepsjon had been forcibly abducted. In one way this news was something of a relief to me. As you are aware on our last expedition we carried a new member, Keya Green. What most of you have failed to notice, in view of recent events, is that whilst she accompanied us ‘out’ she has not accompanied us home.”

Tom pauses, his eyes settling on Mr and Mrs Green.
“Keya Green was discovered missing from her post after a skirmish with another tribe. After searching for five days, we gave up the hunt and returned home.”

Whatever I had expected to have happened, I never imagined this. Looking towards Jamie I feel a sudden tug of compassion, strange because I’ve never liked him much. For that matter I’ve never much liked Keya, but she must have had something to inspire such devotion in Jamie. And he is devoted to her; no one seeing him now could ever doubt that.

A sudden high pitched sound makes me jump. Mrs. Green, who I had thought turned to stone, has suddenly come painfully to life. I pass my arm around her shoulder, rocking her a little, as her tears soak my shoulder in sorrow.

I wish there was something that I could say, but I know there is nothing. At this point words, however sincere, are empty and somehow more painful than silence. I turn a little so that I can sit on the arm of her chair with her leaning against me. Her choking sobs, dry and pain filled, take me back to another time when I held Nella as she was wracked by similar grief.

Mr. Green stands, and I turn to look up at him from tear blinded eyes. He swallows convulsively before speaking.

“Is she dead, Tom?” His face is very pale, older than I’ve seen him look before, and his voice holds a pleading, entreating note.

“I don’t think so, Mr. Green. You remember I said that on hearing of Dec’s abduction I felt relieved in a way. I believe the two incidences are linked: the tribe who took your daughter, also took Dec.”

“Why, what would they want with Keya?” asks Mrs. Green through her tears.

“I would say that Keya was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” answers Tom.

Mr. Denby, who has been following the conversation with a thoughtful gleam in his eye, interrupts at this point.

“I don’t see how, or why, you think that the two incidents are connected. Even if Keya was captured in the way you have outlined, why would they storm our village to get Dec? What possible motive could they have?”

I don’t think it’s until this moment that I realise what Tom is doing. He’s setting forth the facts in such a way that he’s going to have to tell them just what he and Dec are.

“You’re approaching the matter from the wrong angle. You think that Keya is the central point which this entire situation revolves around, but she isn’t, it’s Dec. Keya Green was taken by an Andak soldier, at some point she told that soldier about Dec and they came for him.”

At the mention of the dreaded Andak the room is silenced.
Chapter Seven

Deeta

“How… why… would you say that?” gasps Mr. Denby. “Tomasz Jepsjon, have you no feeling at all that you can calmly announce to Keya's parents that their daughter has been captured by a band of murderous psychopaths, a thing that you cannot know?”

Tom has stiffened, even at this distance I can see the fire and ice burning in his eyes, and the room seems suddenly cooler.

“Keya Green was captured by an Andak soldier, whom she then knowingly or unknowingly, told of Dec Daxman Andak’s whereabouts.”

There is a surreal moment of silence before the inevitable shouting begins.

“You brought the spawn of an Andak here?” splutters Mr. Denby. “What were you thinking of? What of your allegiance to the tribe?”

“Which one?” asks Tom coldly. “Tom Jepsjon may serve this tribe, but Tomasz Dexter Andak’s allegiance lies elsewhere!”

I can almost feel the crowd recede from him, as though he had shouted ‘unclean’. Nella’s graceful pose by the fire place has become awkward, and her mouth is sagging open in surprise. Jamie’s head has lifted sharply, and Ralph is staring at Tom quizzically. I have an uncomfortable feeling that he’s going to laugh.

My eyes meet Tom’s across the room, and I see a look in them that I haven’t seen for sixteen years, since the first time I ever saw him.

“You, you…” Mr. Denby turns on Uncle Jep. “You bought two of the filthy swine here!”

“David, be careful what you say!” interrupts my father sharply. His voice, although not loud, is nevertheless effective. “You have some explaining to do, Tom.”

“That may be, sir, but I’m afraid that I’m not going to do any,” answers Tom. Into the tense silence there is a shout of laughter.

“So sorry, do carry on.” Ralph’s voice is hoarse as he wipes his eyes.

I’m not sure why but I feel better now, as though the ice that has crept around my heart has melted.

“Dad, it’s Tom, just as he’s always been. Why does he have to explain himself to people who are treating him like a criminal?”

“You know nothing, young lady! He is a criminal, born of criminals, so keep your mouth shut.”

Mr. Denby has advanced, his overflowing anger spilling over and on to me. Somehow Tom is between us, and my father’s hand has fallen on Mr. Denby's shoulder, restraining him.
“Control yourself, David. My daughter has a right to express her opinion, you however, have no right to force your opinion on the rest of us.”

As Mr. Denby turns from me, I expel a breath I hadn’t known I was holding.

I had expected the reaction to Tom’s confession to be strong, but I had not expected it to be so violent. Tom, still standing between me and Mr. Denby, surreptitiously takes my hand. It’s only when my fingers are encased in his warm steady clasp that I realise that my hand is cold and trembling.

“Tomasz and I have lived peacefully and helpfully in your tribe since we arrived sixteen years ago. In nothing did we prove to be trouble makers, but to the contrary we have been assets to your community.” Uncle Jep’s soft, accented voice has commanded the attention of us all. “Tomasz’ parentage may not be as you wish, but he is your only chance of recovering Keya. However distasteful we are to you, please remember that.”

“Is that some sort of a threat, Andres Jepsjon?” demands Mr. Denby angrily.

“Not at all; it is a statement of fact. It is you who is threatening, and not only Tomasz and I, but Deetina because she dares to oppose you,” answers Uncle Jep.

The room seems to have settled into two camps: those who are violently opposed to Uncle Jep and Tom, and those who are faintly ashamed of those who are violently opposed.

“I don’t think that anything can be gained from discussing this anymore at this time,” says Mr. Clark. “We have a lot to think about, and our minds cannot be clear in the heat of anger. We should all go home and think things over before we try to find a way forwards.”

The murmur of assent that greets this suggestion is rather relieved, and people begin to leave awkwardly. Jamie appears at my side as I begin to help Mrs. Green from her chair.

“If you like, Mrs. Green, I’ll walk you up stairs,” he offers.

Like I said: I’ve never been a fan of Jamie’s, but I’m liking him better and better. I’ve always thought it rather odd that the Clarks could have one son like Jamie and another as nice as Ralph. Watching him lead Mrs. Green away, I realise that Uncle Jep is right. We all have different faces to our personality, and the one we show one person might not be the one we show to others. Ralph has stopped to exchange a few words with Tom, and Nella has her arm tucked through Uncle Jep’s. My father’s hand on my arm prevents me from joining them.

“No, Deeta. You’ve made your sympathies known publicly, any more and there will be talk. I don’t need to tell you what about.”

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As we walk down the stairwell, I begin to get panicky. After all; my mother was not keen on my friendship with Tom in the first place, what if she demands that I never visit the Jepsjons again?

Strangely enough it’s not my mother who begins the inevitable inquisition, it’s my father.

“Don’t go to bed just yet, Deeta, I’d like a word.”

I gaze longingly at my bedroom door, and then sit obediently on the edge of the sofa.

“Did you know, Deeta?” asks my father quietly.

“No, Dad, not until tonight.”

“You and Tom spoke for some time in the girls’ bedroom; what did you discuss?”
“He asked me about Dec, and I told him all I knew.”
“Is that all you talked of?”
I pause, looking down at my tightly clasped hands.
“No, Dad, we talked about other things too.”
“Like, for instance, his reason for being here instead of with his own people?” Dad asks gently.
“Yes, Dad, and other things.”
There is a slight pause in proceedings.
“Was it a good reason, Deeta?”
For a moment surprise leaves me speechless.
“Yes, it was a very good reason.”
My father settles back in his chair.
“That’s good enough for me.” He looks around and sees Clare and Jan. “You can go to bed now girls, it’s getting late.”
They say a reluctant goodnight, and my father turns to me again as soon as the door is closed behind them.
“I’m sorry, Deeta, but your friendship with the Jepsjons will have to be a little different for a while.”
“But… why? It’s not fair to just stop being friends…”
My father raises his hand to silence me.
“Easy does it, Deeta, I’m not saying that at all. I wouldn’t wish any of my daughters to be fair-weather friends, but you have to see that this changes things. The Andak have a reputation, and like it or not Tom is tarnished by his association with them. You could have a horrible time of this if you give foolish tongues the ammunition they need. Believe me, Deeta, when I tell you that they don’t need very much. All the while Tom was a Jepsjon the time you spent with him, Uncle Jep, and the children, was innocent. Now he is Andak it will not be classed as such.”
“Dad!” A hot blush sets my face aglow.
“It’s the truth. You’re an adult and a female; a pretty one at that. I know exactly how Tom regards you, and I’ve never once had a doubt that he would behave in an exceptional manner. But if you want to be seen as unexceptionable you will have to have the children down here during the day, and Professor Jepson and Tom can come down for their meals and eat with us.”
“Tom won’t do that,” I answer quietly. “He has too much pride.”
“And there’s no reason why he should!” declares my mother. “Poor boy, after all he’s done, all the help he’s been… oh, it makes me so mad!”
“That’s a bit violent for you, my dear.”
“Well of all the — Tom is a good boy!”
I put my arms around her neck, and hug her tightly.
“Can I just go up and see the children, Dad? They’ll be upset.”
My father looks undecided for a minute, and I have a horrible feeling he’s going to say no.
“I’ll go with her, if that will make it more acceptable.”
“Go on then, Deeta, but only fifteen minutes.”
My mother gathers her knitting together and stuffs it into her knitting bag.
“Let’s give those old biddies something to gossip about!”
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Uncle Jep opens the door, and lets us in. The light shows the tired droop of his shoulders and I’m filled with renewed anger.

“How are the children, Uncle Jep?”

“Tom is putting them to bed.” He sighs shaking his head. “The girls have spent most of the evening crying; even Ralph could not cheer them.”

“May I go and see them?”

“I think that they would like that.” His smile is soft and warming.

I hear the boys muted voices as I near their door.

“Goodnight, boys.”

“Aunty Deet!” It’s Roydon’s voice, and I hear the springs of his bed creak metallically as he sits up. “Uncle Tom said you wouldn’t come.”

I move into the room, and sit on the edge of his mattress.

“Well I have come, but I’ll wish I hadn’t if Tom comes in and finds me getting you excited after he’s put you to bed.”

I lean forwards and plant a kiss on his forehead. The boys’ have all reached the stage where that’s all the soppiness they’ll take from me. I’m rather surprised when he leans forwards to hug me tightly, before turning and flinging himself back on the bed as if ashamed of his own softness.

I bid Ricky goodnight, and slip from the boys’ room and into the girls’. Tom is sitting on Carris’ bed, one arm around Carris herself, and Tarri on his lap as he reads to them.

“Aunty Deet!” Carris’s voice is husky from crying, and I see the red puffiness around her and Tarri’s eyes with seething anger.

“Hi, Carry; I’ve just come to kiss you goodnight.”

Carris’ warm arms wind themselves around my neck as I kiss her soft pink cheek.

“Aren’t you going to stay with us?” she asks tremulously.

“Sorry, Carry, not tonight.” I give her a slight hug. “Besides you don’t need me; not when Uncle Tom is here.”

Carris rubs her eyes, but seems content with this reminder as she cuddles back up to Tom. I kiss Tarri’s cheek as she lies against him and he stirs restlessly.

“You two had better go to sleep now. If you like you can both sleep in one bed and keep each other company.” He climbs off the bed and tucks both girls in.

It isn’t until we are outside their room that he talks to me.

“What are you doing up here, Deeta?” His voice is flat and unwelcoming, even a little angry.

“I came to say goodnight.”

“I’m surprised your father let you, it wasn’t a good idea.”

“Is that what you think of me?”

Tom hears the faint inflection of hurt in my voice, and glances down at me sharply.

“Do you really think that I’d let those gossiping old biddies get in the way of my friendship with your family? What sort of a person do you think I am?”

“It would be better for you if you didn’t do this.”

“How?” I ask belligerently.

“What I’m saying is that people will talk, they’ll say…”

“That we’re an item?” Despite my every effort I feel a hot blush spreading over my cheeks. I can only hope that in the half light he can’t see it.

Tom takes my arms and pushes me against the wall, deliberately crowding me and making me feel small and vulnerable. Suddenly I see him in the guise that most people must see him in. Tom is very daunting; taller and broader than most, for sheer mass I have never seen his equal. He oozes power, smouldering with intent even as he
remains calm. People have always been a little nervous of him, now they will believe
they have reason to fear and hate him.
“What they’ll say about you will be much, much worse than that or anything else
you can think of.” His voice is bitter and angry.
I stare up at him for a long while with neither of us speaking. The pressure of his
hands on my arms is still fierce, and I find myself thinking vaguely that tomorrow I’ll
be bruised. It’s strange, but I had thought my father overreacting when he had told me
that my position in the tribe was to come under scrutiny. With Tom so clearly in
agreement with him, I feel a sudden chill of dread.
“I don’t care, Tom.”
For a second I think that he will relent, laugh and tell me that I’m a nutter. However
he turns sharply, pulling me towards the door and shoving me through it. We stand
there for a moment, one on each side of the threshold, as my mother bids Uncle Jep
goodnight. She passes Tom and I where we stand, and begins to descend to our floor,
but I remain fixed in place.
“I care, Deeta.”
Before I can make a reply the door has been closed in my face with something very
like a thud.
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I kiss my parents goodnight, all the while feeling strangely detached. This wasn’t me
calmly saying my goodnights as if earth shattering events hadn’t taken place. These
people weren’t my family; they were strangers, not real, but part of some horrid
nightmare that I can’t seem to wake up from. That’s why I feel so numb, and
everything seems so unimportant and stupid.
This wasn’t reality, there was no reality where our tribe would turn against each
other. Tom would never send me away; he wouldn’t turn from me, almost in disgust.
Was his upset with me?
Or was it directed at himself?
I don’t know. I only know that it isn’t possible for the people I love to act like this.
I sit on my bed, and stare unseeingly at the floor. The enormity of everything
suddenly hits me. Things will never go back to the way they were, no matter what
happens. If we were to find Dec and Keya, if the tribe comes to terms with Toms
parentage, things will still be different. Words will have been said, things that cannot
be taken back, nor ever truly forgotten or forgiven.
We will all be changed by this experience, perhaps only imperceptibly but still
altered. The next time we meet a problem, we’ll meet it differently, knowing that the
experience will change and refine us in different ways. It’s what makes us who we
are.
I give in to the overwhelming desire to weep, saddened at the thought that I’m losing
so many things that I’ve taken for granted. The peace and unity once found in our
tribe, our blissful ignorance of Tom’s family are all things of the past now. Yet mostly
I cry for my friendship with Tom. It seems ever more likely that it will also become a
thing of the past, forbidden not by my father or mother, or even the tribe, those I could
have fought with varying degrees of success, but by Tom himself.
I can’t fight Tom.
It would be a fight I couldn’t win on any level, and it would leave us both with a
bitter memory of our friendship. I would prefer to cling to the recollection of
something sweet if that is all that can be salvaged from the debris of our relationship.
For me at least it will be a long time before I can look back on this day and find anything to treasure. As for the rest; only time will tell if Tom is right in his actions, or wrong.
I wake up early, just after dawn, to purple and grey clouds hanging oppressive and low in the sky. Jan is asleep in the far corner, her arms tucked under her pillow, her sheet and covers lying crumpled at her waist.

She looks relaxed and younger than her years, like a contented child. Her hair is a shining tangle across the pillow, and dark lashes fan over smooth cheeks that are a little flushed. She looks as though she could stay quite comfortably asleep forever; a true sleeping beauty.

How differently this has effected her to me. I have no doubt of her grief, she feels all of this just as I do, but I envy her the way she handles it.

Somehow, no matter how brave I try to be, in a moment it is all there. The tears and the sadness, the sense of loss are feelings that never go away. The all consuming realisation that fills every second of every day with the reality of just how much I miss Dec, never seems to ebb.

Dec was always mine, you see. Somehow I’ve always felt as though the children belong to me a little, as well as Uncle Jep and Tom. I suppose that is a bit presumptuous of me, isn’t it? Talking about him hurts, and yet still I have a burning desire to speak of him no matter how difficult it is.

I move restlessly, jarring my bad arm.

I can’t bear the thought that we know where Dec is and we’re not doing anything about it. I know finding Dec rests on Tom and his ability to work this all out, but I also know he will need help, and help is not something that will be forthcoming now. In fact his, Uncle Jep and the children’s whole future with the tribe is uncertain. Even if they are allowed to stay it will be with a cloud hanging over them; the Andak taint.

I think that it is then that I realise, when I really know that the Jepsjons will leave. Tom won’t stay and put the children and Uncle Jep through that, not just for the sake of his pride.

Tears begin to prick my eyes, and I climb stealthily from my bed. I need some fresh air, something to chase away the headache building behind my temples.

I make my way to the roof thinking that, at least there, I might be able to clear the stuffy feeling from my mind. Maybe then I’ll be able to think of something more useful than how trashy I’m feeling.

The whole building is silent as everyone sleeps. There’ll be a guard on the roof however, just as there always is. I don’t know who it will be because I haven’t stirred from the Jepsjon’s apartments since the day the Andak came. The roster will have changed by now.
I open the door on to the roof, and feel an icy cold shiver make its way down my spine. Usually there’s a brisk and cold wind up here, but today it is still and silent. It’s so eerily unfamiliar that I pause for a moment, one foot through the door and the rest of me still inside the stairwell.

I push off the uncomfortably nervous sensation in the pit of my stomach, and step out into the freezing damp air. In the distance I see the guard on patrol and wave to him, a friendly gesture that comes without thought. I’m surprised when the patroller stops in his tracks and starts to make hurried progress toward me. As he gets closer I smile warmly at him and hold out my right arm, hand outstretched.

“How’s the arm, Deet?” asks Ralph, taking hold of my hand and bringing it in a familiar gesture through his crooked arm.

“How very tactful of you not to mention my face,” I respond in a feeble attempt at humour.

“You won’t get away with that answer.”

“It’s alright so long as I don’t move it, then it throbs a bit.”

“And by that you mean that it feels like its being torn from its socket.”

“No need to be dramatic, Ralphie.” We turn to lean against some convenient railing.

“So what happens now?”

“I guess it’s up to Tom.” Ralph’s face is averted, his eyes searching some distant spot. “You don’t have to worry about the kids; Nella is staying with Uncle Jep and Tom for a while.”

I don’t think that Ralph realises that this knowledge hurts me. No one likes to think that they can be replaced, but it’s particularly unpleasant to know that you can be replaced. Then the bland way that Ralph has offered this information registers, and I feel a pang of compassion.

That Ralph is hurt and that he’s up here tormenting himself in some foolish, but somehow inevitable way, fills me again with the depression I was hoping to escape.

“Will they?”

The suppressed passion and anger in his voice surprise me. I guess I’ve never thought him capable of that sort of thing before, and his fervour elicits an answer that, had I been thinking clearly, I would have tried to soften.

“Probably not.”

He turns again in a strangely tense and controlled way that, for some reason, seems familiar. Odd, because I’ve never seen him look that way before.

“I… she’s only trying to…”

“Spare me, Deeta, I know. Somehow that only makes things worse.”

He turns to me relaxing a little, trying to explain something that I can’t understand. My experience of love is limited to the platonic kind, and my knowledge of love unrequited is nonexistent.

“It’s like being bashed over the head with a mallet every time she does or says something right or kind, showing me the worth of something I can’t have.”

His words are said in that strangely compelling and angry way, and again I’m struck by a sensation of familiarity. He stops and, with an attitude of embarrassment, turns his head away from me.

With great difficulty I force my gaze away from his face, and try to ease the sudden parched feeling in my mouth. Why is it that when things are good they’re very good, but when things are bad everything’s depressing? It’s the old adage: ‘it never rains but it pours’.
“They won’t let him.”
Ralph looks at me startled, not understanding the sudden change of topic.
“How do you mean?”
“The only chance we have of getting Dec and Keya back is if the tribe as a whole will trust Tom, and they won’t, not now.”
“I can’t see that they have much choice in the matter,” replies Ralph shortly.
“Ralphie, you were there last night, you saw what happened. Within five seconds our tribe was split down the middle. It had become them and us; two separate groups of people who had no trust and no liking of each other. They don’t see Tom any more they just see an Andak, and that’s all they’ll ever be able to see from now on in.”
My voice is bitter, causing Ralph to cast me a side long glance. On catching my eye he drops his gaze, flushing a little.
“Don’t be so hard on them, Deet. It was a shock, they need time to adjust and you – you don’t understand.”
He hesitates shuffling a little, as though he’s unsure how to go on.
“What are you trying to tell me, Ralph?”
“That’s the whole problem, Deet: it’s what I’m trying not to tell you.” He raises his hand and rubs his neck. “It’s the stories about the Andak. You don’t know… you’ve been told they’re bad and so that’s what you believe. You’ve never been told why they’re bad and just what they’re capable of.”
“Okay then, tell me.”
“Are you completely off your rocker? I’d be lynched! Deeta, you don’t get it. You’re special; you’ve lived in this compound all your life, you’ve been protected from the hate and horror out there. You know nothing of the evilness that spreads like rot through this city.”
“You’re wrong; Tom has told me about his family…”
“Don’t be foolish, Deeta. Tom is the last person on this earth who would hurt you in that way.” He lowers his voice a little, and leans against the rail again. “There’s more than physical hurt, Deeta. It’s stories like that, and seeing the world outside in all its moral confusion, that will cause you an altogether different hurt. It’s just as unpleasant as anything you can feel physically. In fact, it would be worse because it would change you. It would shake your belief in people, and kill all your hope and happiness.”
“Unlike Nella, who can do anything and remain unspoiled.”
“You know it’s different for her! Do you really think that all she’s been through hasn’t changed her, hasn’t scarred her in ways that she only knows herself?”
On the occasions that I have discussed this issue with Tom, I’ve always ended the conversation feeling that although I might not be useful in the same way that Nell is, in different areas I am just as valuable. Ralph doesn’t seem to have the same happy knack of reassurance; I feel not only useless, but rather pathetic as well.
Tears begin to gather in my eyes, and reflect that I must be pathetic to be so self-indulgent.
I had thought the cool air would refresh me, but I find that my headache is worse and my face and arm are becoming steadily more painful. I feel more awful than I can ever remember feeling before, and the sorrow in my heart over Dec is growing as hope begins to fade.
I’ve always been happy, you see, safe in the knowledge that everything would always be fine. Confronted with the reality of my world falling apart seems to be more than I can handle. Without being able to stop myself I begin to cry, choking sobs that I try to suppress as Ralph slides an arm around my shoulder pulling me towards
him. Even in my distress I notice how clumsy the movement is, and I can’t help feeling slightly dissatisfied. Ralph’s embrace, while comforting, has not reassured me. I don’t know how to describe it, but know that something is missing.

“Don’t cry, Deet! I know everything’s a bit of a train wreck right now, but it’ll get better.”

He begins to pat my shoulder in what I correctly surmise is a gesture to show that he has suffered my clinging long enough and that now is the time to stiffen my upper lip. I pull away, attempting a smile that I’m not close to feeling, and search for something to say. Somehow there doesn’t seem to be anything.

How could I calmly talk about the weather, or something equally unimportant? Yet talking of the problems that we’re facing seems to make things worse. I realise that the reason that I feel so dissatisfied is because I’m talking to the wrong person. The trouble is the person that I want reassurance from doesn’t want me anywhere near him.

“You should probably go back down and try to sleep.”

“I don’t think I could.” I smile. “Perhaps we could go and sit in the hut?”

This plan of action meets with Ralph’s approval, and we begin to walk slowly in the direction of the shelter, Ralph’s arm across my shoulder. Out of the corner of my eye I think I see a dark figure leaning against the wall and watching our progress with interest. However when I turn my head the phantom-like shadow is gone.

Within a few minutes we are ensconced in the shelter of the lookout hut. I wrap myself in one of the blankets, and lean against the wall as Ralph begins to sing softly to himself. It’s the sound of his warm, rich voice that lulls me to sleep.

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Breakfast is nearly over by the time I reach our floor. I told Ralph that he should have woken me up, but he said I’d needed sleep more than food. His parting advice outside my door had been to eat enough for two.

I know the second I walk through the door that something is not right. My father is wearing a thunderous frown, my mother fidgets nervously, Jan is avoiding my eye, and Clare is staring at her plate.

“Deeta, I didn’t think that you were so stupid as to disobey me.”

“D – dad?”

“I was lenient and took into account your feelings, and this is how you repay me? If you’re going to be stubborn about this then I will forbid all association with the Jepsjons.”

“But why?” My voice is roughened by desperation, and my father’s frown lifts a little.

“I made it plain, Deeta. Why did you have to sneak off to see the Jepsjons anyway?”

“But I didn’t! I’ve been up on the roof with Ralph; I fell asleep and didn’t wake up until his shift was at an end. I haven’t seen Tom, Uncle Jep or the children since yesterday.” I hesitate and scuff my shoe against the floor. “Besides even if I wanted to disobey you I couldn’t. Tom told me to back off, Nell’s going to help with the children from now on.”

“What did Professor Jepsjon say?”

“I didn’t really have time to talk to him before Tom threw me out.”

I blush faintly as I hear the note of bitterness in my voice. It’s bad enough feeling like this, without everyone else knowing that I feel like it. My father looks at me
pensively; I can tell he’s thinking rapidly, but about what I don’t know. Seeing the look of anxiety on my face, he smiles.

“Not to worry, Deeta, after the meeting it will be better.”

“But, Dad, everyone is against the Jepsjons now!”

“People were angry and over excited, so much had happened. The night will have soothed their tempers.”

I shake my head, I have an awful feeling that things will not have changed.

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The day passes slowly as we wait for the appointed time for the meeting of the tribe. Nothing seems able to hold our attention, the whole building is silent and in the grip of expectation. I am torn between an urgent desire for time to pass quickly, and a fervent wish to stave off the inevitable unpleasantness that will be part of the proceedings.

Why did Keya have to go out? None of this would have happened if she’d just stayed here.

I wander listlessly around the sitting room a few times, fiddling with the ornaments on the shelves, the biscuit tin lid, even the curtains. It’s a pointless waste of time, but I can’t seem to do anything useful. Jan watches me in a faintly bewildered way the whole time, the book she is reading loose in her hands. With some trepidation I notice that it’s a romance.

“Deeta, stop for goodness sake! Do you have to keep striding about, it isn’t restful, in fact you’re putting me on edge. Can’t you just read a book, or draw a picture?”

Warily I sit on the sofa next to her, and to my alarm her face takes on a softer more understanding look.

“I know you’re worrying about Tom, but getting yourself all wound up like this is not going to make it any better. It will be alright; Tommy’s just a little preoccupied at the moment.”

“Janny!” I roll my eyes, exasperated. “How many times do I have to tell you that Tom and I are not an item? Nothing’s going on.”

Jan regards me through half closed lids.

“I don’t think you can possibly have read enough books.”

“Books are fiction, Janny, their plots are conducted in a place far removed from reality.” I take another look at her novel. “No one reads Lucy Walker for her gritty realism!”

She smiles and shrugs a careless shoulder, settling back into the seat to read her book.

“In ten years, when you and Tom are married with a whole cart load of kids, I’m going to rib you mercilessly for this.”

I think of several things to say to that, but allow her the last word. I escape into the kitchen where mum is kneading dough, and watch as her hands shape it into rounds.

“If you want to be of help to the children, why don’t you cook them something? I’m sure your father won’t mind dropping it off for them.” She takes a quick look at my face. “Nella will be able to keep them occupied, but her culinary abilities leave much to be desired. I always told Leah that she should have taught her; I’d never have let you girls grow up without so basic a skill.”

The clock hands read twelve o’clock, with four hours of interminable waiting until the meeting, I take my mother’s advice and tie an apron around my waist. For a moment we work in silence hearing nothing but the ticking of the grandfather clock.
“I’m sorry about Tom, Deeta.”
My mother’s voice is softly hesitant; as though she is afraid I won’t believe her.
“I know you are.” I begin to measure flour into a bowl. “Why weren’t you angry
when you found out about Tom? I thought that you would be even more against him
than before.”
“It isn’t that I’m against him, Deeta. Tom is a good boy, anyone can see that. It’s
just that he has so much relying on him already; Professor Jepsjon and the children,
that’s without any children he might have of his own one day, and now this as well.
You don’t understand, but Andak is not a last name that anyone wants to be saddled
with. It’s like being stained, and no matter how nice he may be, the second that he
tells people who he is they will never trust him again.”
“But it doesn’t make any sense for us to behave like that; we’ve known Tom since
he was a little boy! We know all about him!”
“But there you have it, Deeta; we didn’t actually know anything about him, did we?”
she asks softly.
I realise suddenly why the tribe has reacted in the way they have. My mother
understands how I feel about the Jepsjon’s. I know them; I know every facet of their
personalities, every mood. They are part of my family and have become dear to me
through familiarity.
It’s different for the rest of the tribe; they have a more superficial knowledge of
them that hardly scratches the surface. They’ve been rattled by recent revelations,
until the only thing that they feel that they can trust in a hundred percent is that Tom
and Dec are Andak. All they see is what that name conjures up.
I understand more clearly now how impossible it is to rectify this. Mum is right;
whatever is agreed upon by the tribe, the Jepsjon’s will always be outsiders, even
among their own people.
Chapter Nine

Deeta

I spend the rest of the afternoon in a state of emotional overload. I’m numbed against either excitement or trepidation. When my mother calls me to tell me it is time to leave for the meeting, I’m startled to find enough food for the five thousand taking up pretty much all of our kitchen surfaces.

The meeting is to be held in the dancehall; it seems strange taking the stairs to that floor so soberly, and in my case, miserably. It’s wrong somehow when I remember the times that I have taken them happily, wearing my best dress and giggling with the anticipation of a party.

I look around me again at the other people on the stairs, so silent and grim, all staring at the floor. They seem too embarrassed to look up in case inadvertently they should make eye contact with another. The only sound I can hear is that of our uniform marching; it’s like a scene from a nightmare, unreal and chilling.

Finally we reach the dancehall and look around. It’s different with chairs set out across the wooden floor, cold and unfriendly, with no trace of its usual gaiety.

Tom, Uncle Jep, and the children are already present, and as I enter the room I catch Tom’s eye. His expression is faintly sardonic. For a moment I don’t understand why, and then I see that their chairs have been segregated a little way off from the rest of us.

Others too are already present. As tribal Elders my father, Mr. Grey, and Mr. Clark all stand by the desk, waiting to set the proceedings in motion. Jamie and Ralph are standing uncomfortable and irresolute half way between the Jepsjons and the rest of us.

The last person I notice is Mr. Denby, seated as far away from the Jepsjons as possible, as though he’s afraid that somehow their Andak filth will rub off on him. He glances at me as I enter and, with the vague hope of heaping fiery coals, I send him my sweetest smile. All the while I’m hoping that one of the uncontrollable rages, that he will no doubt fling himself into during the proceedings, will finish him off.

Nella is sitting on the front row conversing, to my great surprise, with Jamie and Ralph. Ralph lifts his hand in a friendly salute, causing Nella to turn in her seat. She motions to me that I should join them, and I look quickly to my father. He nods briefly, and I make my way towards them.

“Mr. Denby has been here since half past three being completely obnoxious,” whispers Nell as I slide on to the chair beside her. She’s wearing a thunderously moody expression. “It was he that insisted the accused — the accused, Deeta! — were separated from the rest of us.”

For a second I think she might spit like an angry cat.

“Cool down, Nella, he’s not worth getting het up about.”
At Jamie’s words I expect Nella to make a caustic reply, but she shrugs her shoulders and answers that although Jamie’s right, it’s a very difficult maxim to put into practice. I suppose I must betray my astonishment because Ralph leans forwards to whisper conspiratorially in my ear.

“Jamie has taken Tom’s side in all of this and has been quietly talking people round to the fact that Tom is.” Ralph hesitates not wanting to use the name. “One of them. Nell was impressed I think, in any case — you can’t say this isn’t an improvement.”

I nod in agreement looking towards the two of them. It’s strange that these two erstwhile enemies are talking in a comradely fashion, whilst Tom and I, who have been friends for what seems an eternity, now meet with all the warmth of an early frost.

This change in Jamie and Nella’s relationship does of course make the atmosphere much better for me. At this moment to have them sniping at each other would have been the last straw.

“Do you think the tribe will vote to let them stay?” I ask Ralph nervously, as he sits down beside me.

“Jamie said that apart from Mr. Denby, and one or two others, everyone is taking a friendly stance towards the Jepsjons.”

My father stands in the middle of the hall and calls for silence.

“We are all aware of the reason that we have been called together, but the laws state that there should be a brief review. If we could all remain silent as this recap is made it would be appreciated.” My father lifts a piece of paper, and proceeds to read in a clear monotone. “On the 14th day of March our village was breached by the Andak soldiers, and Dec Jepsjon was abducted…”

“Let’s give him his proper name shall we, not the name of decent folk,” interrupts Mr. Denby loudly.

My father looks displeased at this outburst.

“Very well; Dec Andak was abducted, is that better Mr. Denby? On the 17th day of March our Guard returned home, and we were made aware of the fact that Keya Green was missing in action. Tomasz Andak then told us of his belief that both Dec and Keya had been taken by the same tribe, by the Andak. He also made us aware of the fact that he and Dec were members of the Andak tribe.” He lowers the paper. “It is the purpose of this meeting to decide what, if any, action should be taken.”

My father sits down, and Mr. Clark stands to address the assembled company.

“It is the unanimous opinion of the tribal Elders that there is no need for any action to be taken. If anyone wishes to express an opinion, please raise your hand.”

Before he has finished speaking Mr. Denby has jumped to his feet.

“I would like an explanation as to how the Elders could have come to the decision that it is acceptable to do nothing about this outrage?”

“Tom and Professor Jepsjon have lived peacefully with our tribe for sixteen years…”

“He,” Mr. Denby jabs an aggressive finger in Tom’s direction, “stated his allegiance to the Andak!”

For a moment there is silence of a deafening kind.

“I believe…”

“No one wants to know what you believe, Andak!” Mr. Denby cuts in.

“I would like to hear what Tom has to say, Mr. Denby.”

Jamie stands, his tall frame appearing even larger in among the seated people. Mr. Denby, taking a furtive look around, sinks back into his seat at the expression on Jamie’s face.
“Over to you, Tom.”

“I believe Mr. Denby is referring to a remark I made that, it is true, could be misconstrued. I was annoyed that people seem to think that the only considerations are those of this tribe. I stated that although I have loyalties to this tribe, I have loyalties to the Andak tribe too.”

“And what does our tribe have to do with them?” asks Mr. Denby.

“Nothing,” replies Tom coldly. “I have seen to that.”

At some point during the proceedings Ralph took my hand into his. Now, as this first round ends, I find myself gazing unseeingly into my lap. Eventually my eyes focus and I see my tight grip making white and red marks on his fingers, I quickly release the pressure and look up at him.

“It’s okay, Deet.” He smiles reassuringly, and turns back to look at Mr. Clark as he begins to soothe Mr. Denby’s ruffled feathers.

It’s then that I see it; an expression of excitement, a light gleaming in his eyes, a thirst for battle. I find myself wondering why he is not in the guard like Jamie. That he could handle it is obvious, that he would excel like his brother, there is little doubt.

He turns my fingers so that the back of my hand is pressed downwards into my lap, and I see angry red marks where my nails have dug into his flesh. I hadn’t known that I had been holding on so tightly.

By now Mr. Dolan has added his voice of complaint to that of Mr. Denby’s, and their angry voices suddenly grow louder. I jump at the unexpected increase of noise.

“He’s Andak, that’s it; it’s over! He has no right to be here, you have no right to let him stay, and I’m going to see that he doesn’t.”

Mr. Dolan’s sudden lunge towards Tom is barred by Ralph. In spite of his sturdy frame, he proves to be nimble and quick. In what seems to be one fluid movement, Mr. Dolan has been caught and pinned to the floor.

“That is enough, do you hear me? Enough!”

Jamie stands, addressing the crowd as Ralph pulls the unfortunate Mr. Dolan to his feet.

“I’m sick and tired of all you so called men wimping out on your friends just because they’re called by the same name as some people you’re afraid of; it’s embarrassing.”

“It’s more than a matter of fear; there are other considerations that make it necessary for them to go…” begins Mr. Denby in a pious voice. It makes my flesh creep.

“Yeah, right; keep telling yourself that!” jeers Ralph.

“They may be blinded by your lies,” splutters Mr. Denby, facing Tom angrily, “but I am not. You’re one of them! You never will, nor ever could be, one of us. You aren’t fit to live, and I for one refuse to breathe the same air as you, Andak!”

Horrified by the barrage of abuse being hurled at them, I turn smarting eyes towards the Jepsjons. The children are huddled protectively around Uncle Jep, shrinking from the hate they can see in Mr. Denby’s face. Ricky has his arm around Carris as she cries softly, and Uncle Jep has Tarri sobbing on his knee.

I wish they hadn’t been here for this, that we could have protected them from the anger and unpleasantness.

A commotion behind us alerts me to the fact that something is happening. Turning I see that Mr. Green has stood up and is preparing to addressing us all.

“Gentleman, my wife and I have recently lost our daughter to the Andak tribe. As of this moment she could be dead…” Mr. Green breaks off, finding it necessary to swallow several times before he continues. “Despite all of this, we do not hold Tomasz Jep — Andak responsible or culpable in anyway. If we, who surely have the
most right to blame and drive out Tomasz and Professor Jepsjon, find it unnecessary and wrong to do so, what right do you have to demand these things in weakness and fear?”

I don’t think I have ever seen anyone look as embarrassed as Mr. Denby and Mr. Dolan do then. Mr. Dolan, recalled to himself, sits back on his chair his eyes downcast.

“I withdraw my dissent.” His words are addressed to the floor.

Everyone turns to Mr. Denby, who is struggling with the knowledge that he has made a fool of himself, and that there is a great deal of logic in what Mr. Green has said. Yet I can tell he will not back down. He has too much pride, and he has displayed too much hate and anger for anyone who bears the Andak mark. His silence stretches on for an age.

“If that Andak doesn’t leave, I will.”

There is no movement as his words drop like stones into the silence.

I’ve never understood why people find it so difficult to back down and admit that they are wrong. In admitting fault they retain some of their lost credibility, in refusing to back down they make themselves ridiculous.

“You’ll regret this, you see if you don’t, and on your heads be it!”

His departure from the room is accompanied by silence and, as the door closes behind him, the gathered company turns nervously back to the tribal Elders.

“It is the Elder’s recommendation that the Jepsjons should stay. Is there anyone who wishes to contest this?” The room is silent for some moments and Mr. Clark continues. “Very well; the Jepsjons will stay. It is also the recommendation of the Elders that Tomasz Andak should retain his post in the Guard and return to his duties. Is there anyone who wishes to contest this?”

Mr. Phillips raises a timid hand.

“Yes, Carl?” invites Mr. Grey.

Mr. Phillips stands, clearing his throat uncertainly.

“I was just wondering if the Guard has any problem with that?” His voice is apologetic.

“The only problem we had was if Tom was leaving; it would have been a severe loss to the tribe,” answers Jamie.

“Just asking.” Mr. Philips seats himself, relieved to have the tribes attention directed elsewhere and away from him.

“It is the decision of this tribunal that Mr. Tomasz Andak and Professor Andres Jepsjon should remain in their current positions, with no mention of this unrest to be made again. All in favour raise your hand. Those not in favour are to stand.”

I hold my breath lest, at this eleventh hour, someone should object.

“The defendants are therefore found not guilty, and this meeting is now adjourned.”

For a moment the abrupt end to proceedings takes us by surprise, and there is deathly quiet. Beside me an ear-splitting whoop rents the air, and Ralph jumps to his feet. A ripple of laughter runs throughout the room as he jerks me out of my chair, and in his exuberance, lifts me off the ground.
For some reason I don’t share his delight. I should feel jubilant, but I’m left with a hollow sensation that I don’t much like. It doesn’t matter whether the tribal Elders say that the Jepsjons may stay, or if no one thinks it right to make them leave. The tribe will always see them as Andak, as outsiders.

I feel a warm arm encircle my waist.

“See, Deeta; I told you that it would all be alright in the end.”

It’s my father’s voice. I turn to see the pleased and relieved smile on his face, and can’t help comparing it with my own less cheerful thoughts.

“Does this mean I can go back to visiting the Jepsjons, Dad?”

“I don’t see why not now that everything is sorted out. In the meantime I think that we should go and congratulate Tom and Professor Jepsjon.”

There is a substantial crowd around Uncle Jep which relieves me. Then I notice that the crowd thins somewhat in Tom’s direction. Those who do move on to talk to him are ill at ease, and only stay for a few moments before making their escape.

“Aunty Deet!”

Carris erupts from the crowd and into my arms, as I pull her towards me I feel her trembling. I experience again a sensation of anger; the children shouldn’t have been subjected to all this upset, especially when they are already traumatised by the loss of Dec.

“Hiya, Carry, did you miss me?” I ask, making my voice much more cheerful than I feel.

Wordlessly she nods her head, before pulling away and wiping a hand across her face.

“Nella burnt the porridge.” Her voice breaks huskily.

“Oh, I see; cupboard love is it?” I laugh. “Well I guess if that’s as good as I’m going to get, I’ll take it.”

I put my arm around her shoulders, and move to where a slight lee in the crowd of people makes it possible for me to talk to Uncle Jep.

“Deetina, my cherished one.”

His smile is tired but welcoming as I bend to kiss his cheek.

“Hello, Uncle Jep, did you miss my cooking too?” I ask, trying to swallow an uncomfortable lump in my throat.

“Ah, so Carris has informed you of our little mishap has she? Have no worries, Deetina, it was soon rectified.”

“Uncle Tom told Nell he was damned if he’d let her in his kitchen again,” confirms Tarri in a lazy voice before placing her finger back in her mouth.

“And since then Uncle Tom has done the cooking,” interposes Carris quickly.

“Aunty Deet, perhaps you could tell Uncle Tom that mashed potato isn’t supposed to be lumpy.”

“Silence, my sweets; Mr. Richards will think that we are bringing you up to be heathen,” reprimands Uncle Jep.

“Their conversation is charmingly frank.”

“Frank? You put it so delicately; Tom says that they always seem to ‘drop us in it’,” sighs Uncle Jep.

As my father and the Professor continue to talk, I move on to where Tom is standing conversing with Ralph, Jamie, and Nella. As I approach Nella takes my arm and draws me into their comfy little circle. I can’t help but notice that, as I join them, Tom’s relaxed stance becomes tense.

“Hi, Tom.”

“Hello, Deeta.” His voice is careful and controlled. “Not so vocal tonight.”
If he had hit me he couldn’t have hurt me more; should I have said something? Tom obviously sees my silence as disloyalty, I feel terrible. Tom makes a slight, involuntary movement toward me that is instantly suppressed.

“My opinion only made things worse last time, didn’t it?”

“Not the right place for you to have voiced an opinion, Deeta. It would only have set peoples backs up, and then Ralph would have been halting Mr. Denby's mad rush at you.” There is a slight smile in Jamie’s voice.

I cast him a sharp glance and see in his eyes sympathy and reassurance.

Can it be that I’m mistaken in Jamie Clark?

Is it possible that he has seen what Ralph and Nella have not seen, and understood Tom’s quip in the way that it was truly meant?

This whole tribunal must have been awful for him. He had to spend so much time, time that he must have viewed as wasted, helping to sort this out. Yet all the time his girlfriend is being held prisoner to some other tribe. In his heart what he must have wanted to do is get out there and find her. His forbearance has been more than praiseworthy.

It’s strange how my perception of him has changed, has been changing ever since the night of the party when I had danced with him. He is, I realise, so much more than the brash braggart I have always taken him for. He has depth of character that I would never have guessed at in a million years.

I look around the room. It seems everyone is afraid to leave, they huddle together in small groups, whispering and shooting sidelong glances in our direction.

“Earth to Deeta?” Ralph waves a hand in front of my face. “Penny for them?”

I don’t think I could explain my thoughts to any one just now, I hardly understand them myself.

“I was just thinking that if there isn’t some sort of announcement to go home, we might all stay up here forever out of politeness. Think how awkward it’s going to be after the usual pleasantries have been exhausted.”

“Well I’m glad of one thing.” Nella smiles at me. “Now that everything’s sorted you can have your job back. Don’t get me wrong; I love the kids, but if they tell me that Aunty Deet doesn’t do it that way just one more time, I will not be held responsible for the consequences!”

My heart begins to beat uncomfortably fast, and I resist the impulse to look at Tom.

“Poor Nell, you must have been fit to murder me.”

“I can’t deny that the thought crossed my mind.”

“So what happens now?” asks Ralph.

“Now we go home.” My father’s voice answers from behind me, and I jump visibly.

“Some of us are a little stressed and need to relax. I hope you sleep better tonight lad,” he continues holding a hand out to Tom.

“I hope so too, sir. If you don’t mind, I’d like a private word with you tonight if it’s convenient.”

My father seems a little surprised, but he smiles and readily agrees.
Chapter Ten

Deeta

It’s later, and my father has sent everyone to bed in preparation for his upcoming chat with Tom. Surprisingly my father asks me to stay and make a drink for them. Having arranged the tray I bring it to the small table beside the sofa, so that Dad can pour it out when Tom arrives.

“Three cups, Deeta.” My father smiles. “I think you’re going to be a necessary factor in this conversation.”

I fetch another mug from the sideboard, wondering what he could mean, and place it on the tray.

“What’s wrong, Deet?”

He reaches for my hand, finally having noticed my reluctance.

A loud and impatient rap on the door that signals Tom’s arrival interrupts my reply and, almost without realising I’ve moved, I find myself opening the door. Tom’s face leaves me in no doubt that he had expected me to be in bed, and as he enters the room I see a frown settling on his features.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I thought I specified that it was you that I wished to talk to.”

The stinging meaning of his words is not lost on me, and I almost spill the drink I’m pouring in my haste to put it down.

“I asked Deeta to stay; is that going to be a problem?”

My father seems a little bemused and Tom, realising he has been brusque, shakes his head.

“I don’t suppose it makes the slightest difference,” he concedes, but I can tell that he wishes me elsewhere. “I’ve come to talk to you, sir, because it’s necessary for us to start looking for a new home, a new compound.”

Whatever my father had been expecting; this wasn’t it. For a second this statement takes him by surprise.

“I had thought that there might be a need for that. I wasn’t sure, but obviously you think it’s unavoidable?”

“Yes, sir, completely unavoidable. The Andak will come back for me, and whether they find me or not they will never believe that this tribe isn’t protecting me. They already know that they can breach our security, and won’t think twice about doing so. Believe me when I tell you that you don’t want the trouble they’ll bring.”

“We don’t have time to find a place do we?” My father’s face is grey and drawn.

“No, sir.” Tom shakes his head. “Our best course is to go to another tribe for help, one with whom we enjoy peaceful relations.”

“The Marshalls.”

It is a flat statement, not a question.

“I would welcome another suggestion, sir,” answers Tom.
He’s sitting on the sofa, leaning forwards, his elbows resting on his legs. His face is
deadpan calm, hiding his thoughts from us. “They will expect compensation for their
help.”
“That’s what I’m afraid of,” answers my father dryly.
“Unfortunately we have little choice, sir.”
“That doesn’t make the idea any more palatable. What do you suggest we do?”
“That you send me, Jamie, and Nella to the Marshall council while the rest of the
tribe strips this place. The Marshalls will make their terms, and whatever those terms
are we’ll have to accept them. No matter what happens, by tomorrow night we must
have left this building.”
“We haven’t even spoken to the other Elders yet!”
“Yes, sir; I was hoping that you would be ready.”
“You want to go now?”
“Yes, sir. At half past four tomorrow morning I’m leaving for Marshall territory
with, or without, the Elder’s permission if a decision has not been reached.”
My father’s blue eyes regard Tom steadily.
“You’re in an awful hurry.”
“You don’t know them like I do. I just wish we could be gone sooner.”
“In that case; I’ll be right back.”
My father stands, and makes his way across the room to his bedroom. When he’s
gone Tom and I sit in uneasy silence, and I find myself listening intently to his even
breathing.
“It looks like you’re going to get what you want, Deeta.”
“How do you mean, Tom?”
“You always wanted to see what it was like out there ‘just once’. Well, now you
will.”
“There’s no need to look so cheerful; you always said it would upset me.”
My tone is faintly teasing, but the smile slides from Tom’s face to be replaced by a
frown.
“Pathetic isn’t it; all I’ve ever tried to do is stop you and the kids from getting hurt.
Now here we are; I haven’t managed to protect you from anything, have I? Well, maybe
one thing, but even then not completely.”
The sound of Dad opening the door prevents me from asking what he means. In
truth I probably wouldn’t have the nerve to ask anyway.
“You’d better go to bed, Deeta, I’m sorry I kept you up. I was expecting something
different.”
Tom turns sharply and meets my father’s eyes. For a second they look at each other,
and then Tom drops his gaze and heads for the door.
“We should get going.”

The room is quiet when they are gone, too quiet. It makes me feel lonely, but I don’t
go to bed. I sit in the darkened room thinking until my head thuds with unspoken
words.
How often I’ve wanted something to happen, anything that might change things,
iven them up. How stupid could I have been?
Dad says that girls are never satisfied; they always want something different to what
they have. I never knew that it was so true before; because now that everything is
completely different, all I long for is that things should be as they were. I hate
everything that has happened, and never thought that excitement could bring such pain.

“Deeta?” At the sound of my mother’s voice I jump nervously. “Why aren’t you in bed?” She sits beside me, and takes my hand in hers.

“I was just thinking; did Dad tell you what’s happening?”

“Briefly, is that what you’re worried about?”

“I’m worried where this is all going to end.”

“Honey, it won’t do a bit of good to worry about something that you can’t control or foresee.” She smooths my hair back from my face.

“But all I can think of is how wrong everything is going.”

“That won’t do you any good either. Come on, you need to sleep; tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

I let her pull me up from the seat, and we walk together to the door of my bedroom.

“Don’t worry; your father will sort everything out.”

She kisses me again and bids me goodnight.

I crawl into bed and feel the covers settle warm and comfortable around me. I realise suddenly that this will be my last night in this apartment, in this room, in this bed. Tomorrow we will be goodness only knows where, in a new building with new people.

I’m alarmed by the prospect.

All the people I know, I have known from birth. Apart from the Jepsjon children, Tom and Uncle Jep were the last outsiders to move to our tribe. I fall to wondering what these new people will be like, what their building will be like. Will I find new friends, or think the Marshalls an unpleasant people?

In all my imaginings I never thought that something as big as this would happen, it scares me with the vastness of the unknown.

Will we tell them Tom is Andak?

What if we don’t and then somehow they find out, what would happen then?

The questions stretch on, many and unanswerable.

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Tom

“You think we should leave?”

Mr. Grey’s voice conveys his complete and utter incredulity.

“We don’t have a choice, Malcolm. Tom says that they will come for him and Professor Jepsjon, and that there will be trouble for us whether they are here or not. Considering what happened last time, I can see why we wouldn’t want to be around when they arrive.”

“Last time they came the collateral damage was very low; they were obviously trying to keep injury to a minimum. Next time they won’t have the same consideration.” Tom is leaning against the wall, his face in shadow as he speaks.

“I don’t think that Deeta thought the damage all that low,” remarks Ralph drily.

“Her thoughts on the matter are immaterial.” Tom interrupts. “The point is that we must leave here. You don’t seem to understand that there is no decision to be made, only action to be taken.”

“But we can’t leave our home; we’ll have to leave our possessions… all that we have…”

“On the plus side you won’t be dead,” interrupts Tom impatiently.
“Where will we go?”
“You already know the answer to that question, Jamie, there’s only one place we can go.”
“Then the answer is no! I can’t believe that you’re actually suggesting that we hand ourselves over to those blood suckers!”
“Then what do you suggest?” asks Tom. “You know we can’t stay here and fight the Andak.”
“And you know what will happen to our tribe if we join the Marshalls; do you want to see Ricky in the Guard?”
“No I don’t, but I’d rather that than see an Andak soldier put a bullet through him. Jamie, if we succeed in getting Keya and Dec back, where do you think is the first place that they’ll look for us?”
“You know that the Marshalls are not to be trusted.”
“Maybe we should try to find another place, set up another compound…” begins Mr. Clark.
“There isn’t any time for that, we have to move quickly. Do you think I would suggest the Marshalls if there was any other way?” Tom sits down and spreads his hands out in front of him. “Say for arguments sake that we had enough time to set up another location and move the tribe there. The Andak would find us, and believe me when I tell you that it wouldn’t take them long. We need the Marshalls themselves as much as we need the shelter that they can provide us with. Don’t you see? We need their protection.”
“You think that the Andak will follow us?” asks Jamie, suddenly alert.
“Yes, they’ll follow us.”
“And you think with the Marshalls on our side we have a better chance at winning?” Ralph’s voice is thoughtful.
“A better chance, yes, but still a hopeless one,” answers Tom.
“Then I’m sorry, but I don’t see the point of your plan; we might as well stay here.”
“My point is this: we move to the Marshall compound and the safety they afford. They’re a big tribe, Jamie, so it will take some time for the Andak to organise an attack. Hopefully it will give me enough time to get home and figure this out.”
There is silence after Tom has spoken, and the air is heavy with his words and their meaning.
“Home, Tom?” asks Jamie quietly.
“I’m Andak, Jamie. Like it or not that’s who I am, and the Andak compound is my home.”
“I don’t understand; you live with us, not them. Won’t they think it’s a little strange when you turn up?”
“We have an understanding.”
“Care to elaborate?”
“No.”
The atmosphere in the room becomes uncomfortable, but Tom doesn’t seem effected by it.
“There’s no choice, Jamie. I know it’s hard to accept, but there just isn’t.” Tom looks around the room at all those gathered. “Don’t you think it’s time we stopped pretending that there is?”

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Deeta
I don’t remember falling asleep, but I find myself being shaken awake by Jan. She tells me, in a peremptory manner, that it’s six o’clock and that Dad is still not home. I know that, true to his word, Tom will be on his way to Marshall territory by now.

“You might have woken me last night, and told me what was happening!” Jan’s voice is faintly reproving, and looking at her face I see she is taut with excitement. I snuggle down beneath the covers, luxuriating in their warmth.

“If I had it would have been two of us who couldn’t sleep.” Jan raises an eyebrow, the action giving her face something of an insolent cast.

“You didn’t seem to be having too much trouble, Deet,” she remarks drily. I sit up in bed, stretching my arms above my head.

“What a day to choose to be shattered,” I mutter sleepily, holding the cold chain of my locket away from the warmth of my skin.

“A nice cold wash is what you want; it’ll revitalise you,” prescribes Jan.

“Or finish me off.” I take another look at her through half closed eyes. “I bet you didn’t.”

“I can’t imagine a more ghastly way to start the day, getting up is bad enough. No, I washed in warm water and, because I’m such a loving sister, I saved some for you. You realise that you’re so lucky to have me, don’t you?” She stands up. “If you get up, I’ll go and fetch it for you.”

By the time she returns I’ve not only managed to drag myself out of bed, but I’ve begun sorting all our necessary possessions into a neat pile, one on each bed. I wash and dress as quickly as I can. Within a remarkably short space of time we have packed the few items that could conceivably be called necessities, into two bundles.

Our mother enters the room, her face creased into a worried frown. For a moment her glance takes in the bundles on the bed, and a soft smile spreads over her face. She sags against the door frame in relief.

“Bless you, girls. I never thought you’d be finished, or that you’d have taken just the barest minimum.”

For a moment I think she might cry, but she pulls herself upright and beckons us into the kitchen. Clare is standing in the middle of a hopeless disarray of utensils, pots, and pans, holding a mixing bowl and looking very lost.

Despite the fact that we can only take a little, it takes us a long time to decide just what that little should be. Finally the kitchen is finished, and the few things we have decided to take are parcelled up neatly.

“What else; it’s not like we can take the beds or the sofas.”

My mother sits on a chair and pushes her fringe back from her face.

“We have no way of transporting anything that big. Your father said we could take a few necessary personal items, a few things from the kitchen, and as many blankets, cushions, and pillows as we have. Most of the room will be taken up by stores and plants. At least the bigger animals can help with the load.”

In the end it’s kind of pathetic; a small mound of belongings piled in the middle of the room is all we will take of this place. We leave our apartments to go and help where ever we can. Clare goes up to help Philip and his family, and mother goes down to help Nella’s Aunt Leah. Jan and I go up to the Jepsjons apartment to help Uncle Jep.

There is no reply to our knock, and so we push open the door. Ricky is parcelling up the things from the kitchen. Carris brings piles of clothing and blankets from the bedrooms for Roydon to sort through and place in bundles. Uncle Jep and Tarri are sorting through the chest.
Now to me that chest is very dear. It contains children’s clothes in all ages, girl and boy that, starting with Ricky, all the Jepsjon children have worn. Mother and I, along with Jan and Clare, made every item.

The movement of the door catches Ricky’s attention, and he looks up quickly.

“Aunty Deet!”

I feel a thrill of pleasure at the joy in his voice.

“Isn’t it exciting, Aunty Deet? We’re going to move to a different compound. Uncle Tom says that there will be lots of other people there!” Carris has run forward to clasp my hand, and I notice that her fingers tremble with eagerness.

“It’s definitely an adventure, Carry.”

I turn to look at the neat piles of oddments that cover the room. I’d thought to find the Jepsjons in a bit of a pickle without me here to help. Now I see that, aside from being rather vain, it was also pretty foolish of me. If there is one outstanding thing about both Uncle Jep and Tom, it’s their organisation skills. No one who had been raised by them could help but be organised too.

“Deeta, Jan, how pleasant to see you.” Uncle Jep leans on the arm of a chair and hauls himself to his feet. “I hope I am correct in thinking you have come to help, because assistance would be more than welcome?” He brushes a large handkerchief over his face, and Jan places her hand on his arm.

“Sit down, Uncle Jep; first things first — I’ll make you a drink.”

Professor Jepsjon smiles and pats her cheek.

“You too are a precious gift, Jan.”

When she is gone I kneel and pull some clothes from the chest.

“What have you decided to do with them, Uncle Jep?”

“I’m not sure; we may have need of them yet,” he smiles. “You and Jan are very similar, in all the things that matter anyway, Clare too.”

“Uncle Jep! I’m nothing like either of my sisters; Jan’s clever and restless, and Clare’s so self possessed. Mum says I’m still a little girl at heart.”

“You are all similar, don’t contradict, you know I don’t like it!” laughs Uncle Jep. “I said in the things that matter: you all understand that tea should be available in large quantities throughout the day. Not that I disagree with your mother; Clare was made to grace a palace, and Jan to turn some poor man’s hair grey with her teasing…” Uncle Jep breaks off and strokes his beard.

“You’ll give me a complex, Uncle Jep,” I laugh. “What about me?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me!”

Uncle Jep is silent for some moments, looking somewhere into the half distance.

“I don’t know, Deetina.” He states simply. “You have been so sheltered, more so even than your sisters. You know nothing of life or of people, in truth I think both scare you. You have little experience of anything but Tom, and I, and the children. You carved out a niche for yourself with us, somewhere you were comfortable and safe. With each passing day I have watched you close yourself off from all that is new, until it becomes impossible to answer the question of who you are, because you do not know yourself. I think that you have courage and that you are resourceful, maybe you are brave. Yet at this moment I see you look at upheaval and adventure with fright in your soul, so that you see only the bad and no good at all.”

I wish I could deny it, tell you he’s wrong, that I’m just content with what I have, not too scared to try for anything more. But I can’t lie to you can I? I know you’d see straight through it, straight through me.
I’ve always been scared. Not of anything in particular: I don’t want you thinking I’ve been mistreated or anything. Nothing terrible has ever happened to me. It’s kind of hard to explain. I’m not exactly afraid of the things that might happen, but more of how I might react to the things that might happen. Does that make any sense to you?

I guess that makes me scared of myself, doesn’t it? That’s kind of pathetic, I know, you don’t have to tell me.

It’s just that if I plod along, I’ll never know, never have to face the truth. I can kid myself that I could be just like Nella, that if push came to shove I wouldn’t just crumble under the pressure. But if I try and don’t succeed then I’ll know for sure. Could I live with that?

Could I live with knowing that I’m spineless? That I’m the first out of the door if there’s the merest hint of trouble?

It’s the untold horrors that I’m afraid of. What are they? How bad must they be, that they are always ‘untold’? Ever since I can remember, people have told me that the world outside the compound is an evil and dangerous place, a place that will hurt me. The inevitable question is how, and yet it is the only question that remains unanswered, because everything is always “untold”.

Now suddenly, after a life of indoctrination against the evils of the outside world, I’m being asked to gleefully dive head first into them. Is it any wonder that I’m confused? That I’m filled with fear and sickening dread?

“Deetina?” Uncle Jep leans forwards to clasp both of my hands in his. “I didn’t mean to hurt you; if I have I am most truly sorry. I do not censure you for your actions; you have been more than kind to me, and the children, and Tom. You have given of the bounty of your heart, and believe me when I tell you that it has made me love you as my own child.” He pauses, passing his arm around my shoulder. “It is only that what I see of you I love, so that I am eager to see that which is as of yet unawakened within you.”

“What have you done with all the cups, Ricky?”

Jan sticks her head through the door that leads into the kitchen.

“On the table.”

Ricky’s deft hands are busy with another parcel, and he doesn’t look up as he speaks.

“I think perhaps it would be best to take these things, don’t you, Deetina?” Uncle Jep’s voice is questioning, but I know the actual question that he is asking has remained unspoken.

“Yes, Uncle Jep, I think so too.”
Chapter Eleven

Deeta

The day passes quickly, so fast in fact that I have no time for my thoughts. Instead I’m caught up in some strange rhythm that makes me unaware of time and work. Although we have been told to strip the place, in reality there is little that could be termed moveable goods. Sure there is plenty that we could reuse, but no way of transporting them all the way to Marshall territory. I meet Ralph for the first time today in the stairwell; Jan and I are taking a load down to the ground floor, when I hear fast footsteps behind us.

“Hello, ladies; need a hand?” he asks, juggling the bags and boxes he’s carrying until he has room to take a back breakingly heavy suitcase from my unresisting hand. I notice with some asperity as we move on that, although the weight of that bag had hampered my progress greatly, it doesn’t seem to impede Ralph at all.

“Only one?” asks Jan breathlessly. “I could do with six or seven extra hands!”

“Where have you been, Ralph?” I ask, shifting a box from one arm to the other.

“I went up to help Mr. and Mrs. Green; Jamie had to go with Tom so he asked me to keep an eye on them. Then I spent more time than I care to think about, knocking every scrap of wood I could lay my hands on into carts to carry what movable goods we possess to the Marshall compound.”

“Will there be enough room for everything?”

“Probably not half as many as we could use, but enough to make do. The biggest problem will be provisions, not just for ourselves, but also for the animals.”

Something in his voice tells me that he doesn’t think that to be our biggest problem at all. We reach the ground floor and I’m startled to see through the iron slats across the windows that it’s dark outside.

“What time is it?” I wonder aloud in surprise.

“Long past dinner time, at least that’s what my stomach is telling me. It might not be reliable though, as I didn’t have lunch.”

“None of us did you big ox!” laughs Jan, giving Ralph a playful shove.

I look around us. Everywhere there are parcels, boxes, and crates. Some of the larger items have been packed into the waiting carts already, but I know that we will have to carry much of the smaller stuff.

“We should be finished soon I think,” Ralph says, placing our things neatly into a nearby cart.

“What do you think we’ll do about dinner, Deet?” asks Jan wearily. She sits on top of a suitcase and twists a curl around her finger.

“I did quite a bit of cooking yesterday; we should have plenty to share round.”

“How far round?” asks Ralph anxiously.
“I suppose there might be a few scraps left over for you,” Jan responds.

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Our apartments seem strangely full when I think that, in just a little while, we will leave it. The battered sofa and arm chair are still in their proper places around the edge of the threadbare blue rug. The coffee table with the varnish flaking off is still stationed in the centre of the room.

Ralph has gone to tell my father and the other Elders of the tribe that Jan and I are preparing refreshment, and we expect them almost immediately. Apart from all I made yesterday, we cook everything that is left in our store room.

“I wonder what the Marshalls will be like; do you think they’ll welcome us, Deeta?” ask Jan as she prepares naan bread.

She has caught her hair up into a quick bun, and loose curls have escaped their confines, falling in delicate ringlets over her face and neck. I notice that she has a smudge of flour over one cheek.

“I hope so; Tom will have done all he can to make sure that we’ll be okay.”

Jan nods and places the bread on the hot plate above the fire.

“Do you think it will be alright?”

“Do I think what will be alright?”

Jan pushes a tendril of hair back from her face.

“All of us walking through the City like some sort of mass exodus. It couldn’t really be construed as safe, could it?”

I too have been thinking of the trek we must make, and as Jan says it isn’t safe. In fact I can’t think of anything more unsafe. There are plenty of tribes out there to attack us, and plenty of reason for them to do precisely that considering all the provisions we’ll be carrying.

“I think we have as good a chance as any.” The glib words roll off my tongue with more conviction than I feel, and somehow I manage to keep my voice steady.

“Are you scared?” Jan’s voice is very soft.

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

Pleased to find ourselves in such accord we laugh, and it is at that moment that our father walks into the room. He’s followed by Uncle Jep, the children, and several others. Dad looks tired and pale, but as he sees us he smiles, the lines on his face relaxing.

“Are we finished, Dad?” asks Jan, lifting a puffed out pillow of naan bread from the hot plate.

“We’ve packed all we can take, if that answers your question,” our father answers, gratefully sinking into a chair.

“How long do you think everyone will be?”

“Ten minutes, not more. I told them we started eating in ten minutes with or without them, so I’m pretty sure they’ll be here on time.”

“That’s getting to be an often used phrase.”

Jan and I continue piling plates with food, and as people arrive they help. Half an hour later we are still cooking, there is a friendly murmur of voices, and people eat at a steady pace. Ralph has supplied us with drinks and plates of food, and is leaning against the work surface of the island that we are working on in a comfortable and friendly manner.
“Alright, Ralph, hello girls?” Jamie’s large frame looms up before us. “How did things go?”

“Not bad, we’re ready to leave this second if we need to. What about you?” There is a touch of anxiety in Ralph’s voice.

“Not too bad; they had us over a barrel and they knew it, but they seem friendly enough.”

Despite his words I know they are reassurances for mine and Jan’s benefit, between Ralph and Jamie there passes a look that means something else entirely. I find myself scanning the room for Tom, and at last see his dark head bent towards Professor Jepsjon. Even from this distance I can see the earnestness of their discussion.

“Hiya, Ralph. Hello girls.”

Nella, resplendent in a black jumpsuit that she has the cheek to call her uniform, joins us with a drink in one hand and a spring roll in the other. At her friendly salutation, the first I think that he has ever received from Nell, I notice a crimson flush begin to creep up Ralph’s neck. He manages to nonchalantly greet her in reply, but that crimson wave refuses to be quelled.

“Ralph, could you do me a favour and take these rolls to…”

Before I have even finished my sentence, Ralph has taken the plate and vanished. Jamie’s eyes meet mine for a brief second in understanding.

“Everyone, can I have your attention?” Mr. Clark is standing on a chair and, as his voice is particularly carrying, the hum of conversation ends almost instantly. “Thank you. Now you all know that we sent Tom, Jamie, and Nella to ask for shelter with the Marshall tribe. They have extended an invitation to us to join with them, and have sent members of their guard to help protect us on the journey there. So now, if everyone has finished, it’s time to leave. You have ten minutes to gather yourselves together on the ground floor. No matter what, in ten minutes we leave.”

As people begin to file from the room my father calls to me and Jan.

“Leave everything as it is girls. You did a marvellous job, but now you need to get your coats and things and go downstairs.”

“Janny, can you get my coat and bag while I collect the food to take with us?” Jan nods and dashes off towards the bedroom while I gather the food together. By the time she is back I have two bags ready for us to take.

It’s odd leaving the place that my sisters and I were born in, strange to think we will never enter this place again. Mostly it feels surreal, as though any second I might just wake up to find that this has all been a dream, that we don’t need to leave, that Dec and Keya are both here with us, and that Tom and I are still friends.

As we enter the ground floor I feel a familiar tightness in my stomach, the faintly nauseous feeling of fear that so often assails me now.

“Hello, Deeta.”

Tom’s quiet voice sounds close to me. I turn to find him standing, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, right beside me. The tightness in my stomach loosens momentarily only to take a stronger hold, and I find my breathing hitches unevenly.

In the darkness, with only a faint light shining on his jet black hair, Tom appears to me in a different light.

“Hi, Tom.”

My voice comes out an octave higher than it ought, and I lose the ability for rational thought. Biting my lip, I turn away from Tom’s frown.

“Are you scared, Deeta?”

His voice is concerned and he leans forward, his hand lifted. For some reason that I can’t possibly fathom, I take a hurried step backwards and away from him.
“No!”

The word comes out hysterical and panicked, and Tom’s hand drops back to his side. There is a long pause as Tom straightens. I see a kind of cold fury has settled over his features. We continue to face each other as Jamie, Nella, Ralph, and Jan come to stand with us. Tom, becoming aware of them, finally breaks the awkward silence that has fallen over us.

“I thought you should have this.” He holds a gun out towards me. I’m used to doing what Tom tells me to, so I take it from him out of habit. The weight is cold and unfamiliar in my hand. Tom’s eyes appraise me quickly.

“You can use one?” he asks. “I know you had lessons.”

“Well I can scare the living heck out of whoever I point it at.”

“She’s a good shot, Tom, Janny’s good too,” interrupts Nella.

“You have to say that seeing as though it was you who taught us,” teases Jan.

Tom pulls out another gun, and hands it to her. She takes it from him in an expert hand, and tucks it nonchalantly into the waist band of her trousers, pulling her coat down over the top of it. Tom smiles in approval and relief, but frowns again as he sees that I am still holding the firearm warily out in front of me. Belatedly I too tuck the gun out of sight, checking and then double checking that the safety catch is on.

When the sign comes for us all to move out and onto the street, our little group moves together. Partly I think it’s from habit, but also because Tom has somehow arranged it that way. I hold my breath, a thrill of excitement coursing through my veins.

Finally; this is it!

We emerge out into the night, and for the first time I see the tall imposing shapes of our neighbouring buildings towering over me. They’re clothed in mantles of ivy, and in the silence I hear the rustle of the leaves in the wind.

All my life I have imagined this moment, stepping into the outside world. Now that I’m finally here I find it so different from all my imaginings. For a moment I am completely awe struck and stop, looking around in fascination.

The City is so altered down here, so much bigger than I’m used to seeing it from the rooftop. I feel tiny, lost, and completely insignificant. It’s so wide open. I’m used to being closed in behind confining walls of brick and concrete. Panic wells up within me, along with the feeling that I’m horribly exposed.

I feel oddly nervous, as though the City is some strange alien environment. It’s scarier than I thought it would be. There’s too much space, it’s too big, and I feel myself break out into a cold sweat.

Somehow I’d always thought that it would be like stepping into a novel. I’d dreamt I would enter the dark and dangerous night, watching for the shadowy movements of my adversaries. If I was particularly fortunate maybe I would be rescued by a handsome stranger who would then… well, you get the picture.

Instead I find it threatening. On the outside it seems so peaceful and beautiful. Then again, bathed in moonlight pretty much everything looks more romantic, doesn’t it?

Yet I know the truth, I know how dangerous it is out here. This City eats people alive. It lulls them into a false sense of safety, looking so harmless and broken. I know that in an instant that unthreatening exterior can change into something much more sinister.

The broken and empty buildings, some half torn down and surrounded by rubble, with their gaping windows and broken glass, are softened by the pale light and clinging foliage. In the sky I see the stars shining brightly like so many diamonds glittering on a velvet cloth.
I shiver slightly, and try to pull myself together, turning back to rejoin the crowd. An idea strikes me and I pause, wondering if my father knows where Jan and I are. Perhaps I should have made sure he knew that we were with Tom and safely out of the compound?

Realising that there is little I can do about it now, I fall into step, and make my way with everyone else through the dark streets. Mostly the night is silent, but every now and then sounds, strange and unnerving, travel the night air.

It is during a period of long silence that a sudden explosion rents the air. It isn’t very close to us, but it startles me and I trip. I brace myself for an impact that never comes, and look up to thank the person who has steadied me.

“Thanks, I almost came a cropper there, didn’t I?”

“You almost did,” he answers, pulling me upright. He removes his arm from my waist, but still holds my hand lightly.

It’s only as it registers that his voice is unknown to me that I remember Mr. Clark saying something about the Marshall guard sending some of their men to help us.

“Yes, I think you’ve made the connection now,” he laughs. “That was too friendly a thank you; who did you think I was?”

“I don’t… didn’t know. I just thought…” My voice dries up.

“You just thought I must be someone you knew; didn’t they tell you some of us had come along?”

“I forgot.”

“I’m not complaining, love. I liked my end of the deal; I don’t generally get to hug pretty girls by moonlight. The name’s Robin.”

“Nice to meet you, Robin,” I murmur, slightly abashed by his manner of conversation.

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“What’s your name, love?”

“Deeta?” Tom’s voice is imperative, and I blush guiltily.

“Deeta? That’s pretty; it suits you.”

I suppose I should be flattered. Yet the truth is that, apart from the moonlight, it’s dark so he couldn’t possibly tell if I’m pretty or not. Also I’m unused to his sort of friendliness, and it’s making me uncomfortable. And lastly, like the straw that broke the camel’s back, Tom’s disapproving presence is making me feel like I’ve been engaging in an illicit activity. I kind of wish Robin would go taser himself.

“Thanks for looking after her, Robin.” Tom’s voice conveys anything but gratitude as he takes hold of my arm.

“My pleasure, mate, she’s not the sort of thing I’d like to lose,” answers Robin cheerfully.

Tom’s hand tightens so that I gasp his name. Looking down at me, he drops his hold to my hand and pulls me after him.

“We have to catch up with the others.”

I struggle to keep up as Tom weaves his way speedily through the crowd, towing me in his wake. Suddenly his pace slows to a crawl, and he drops my hand.

“What happened, Deeta?”

An impetuous torrent of explanation that I have held, with great difficulty, pent up until now, tumbles from my lips.

“It was the explosion, it made me trip and—”

“I don’t mean that, why did you stop?”
“Oh.” I blink up at him stupidly. “I suddenly wondered if Dad knew we were with you. I thought maybe he was worried.”

“I told him you and Jan were coming with Uncle Jep and me, I should have said.” And I should have known that, of course, Tom would have arranged it all first. We walk in silence, a little faster now, until we reach the others.

“Did you find her, Uncle Tom?” Tarri’s sleepy voice floats down from the celestial place above Ralph’s head as he carries her on his shoulders.

“Yes.”

“Good; Aunty Janny says she has the food.”

The trek is a timeless affair, leaving me unsure of just how long we’ve been walking. At first we had walked through streets lined with buildings, but now the buildings have thinned out. Piles of rubble, all that is left of skyscrapers, hide what’s left of the streets. The going is much rougher, but not impossible.

I hear a low whistle, soft but carrying, and turn apprehensively to Tom. He nods toward Nella.

“You go left and circle round.”

Nella melts into the darkness as Tom takes my hand, and presses it to where the gun he gave me nestles against the small of my back.

“Remember that’s there, and don’t be afraid to use it.”

He moves into the darkness, becoming invisible against the rubble so quickly that I’m not sure which way he goes.

The tightness in my stomach that never really left is back again in full force. I wait, trembling in the darkness, listening for another low whistle or the sound of approach. I hear nothing, and the silence stretches on undisturbed by anything but the sound of the tribes’ progress through the night.

A faint breeze, cool but refreshing, snakes its fingers through my hair, blowing curls into my eyes. With one hand I take a hold on the gun and pull it from my waistband, and with the other I tuck my curls back behind my ear.

A shape surges forth from the darkness and I jerk the gun up and point it, with a steadiness that surprises me, towards it. As it nears and separates I see that it’s Nella and Tom.
Chapter Twelve

Deeta

“I like a warm welcome.” Tom takes my hand and the gun in his. “Next time, Deeta, remember the safety catch.”

“Did you find anyone?” asks Ralph.

“Yes.”

Tom doesn’t elaborate, but I know that we are safe again. Before us, rising out of the rubble, is another group of buildings.

“Is that it, Tom? Is it Marshall territory?”

“Yes.”

The disapproval in his voice is pronounced.

“Tom, why is it you and Dad were so annoyed that we had to come here? Dad said it was an unpleasant situation.”

Tom is so silent that for a while I think he will ignore my question.

“The Marshalls have a reputation for being ruthless.”

“They’re cruel?”

“Maybe just canny, but in a certain situation, to a certain set of people, it amounts to the same thing.”

“How do you mean?”

“The Marshalls will help anyone, Deeta, but only for a price. For different people, it’s a different price.”

“What was our price, Tom?”

“We didn’t have any time; we were desperate, and had to agree to anything they offered us.”

Icy cold fear wraps itself around my heart.

“Tom, what is it; what did we agree to?”

“Our tribe was our price, Deeta. Usually when the Marshalls absorb a tribe, they select one of the tribal Elders to serve on the Marshall council. We had no choice but to take whatever they offered us, and they didn’t offer one of our Elders a place on their board. We’re Marshalls now; our lives will be governed by the Marshall high council, and we must obey their laws, our own are obsolete.”

For a while it seems hard to take in, and I don’t understand why it will be so different.

“Will it be so very bad, Tom?”

Tom pauses and, taking my arm, pulls me round to face him.

“They have a draft, Deeta!”

“A what?”

“A draft; all those over the age of thirteen must enter the guard, it’s obligatory.”

“You mean me too?”
“I mean you, Clare, Jan, Ralph, and Ricky; all of you.”
“But we can’t, can we?”
I hear uncertainty in my voice, and I’m rather surprised that I’m not having full blown hysterics.
“You’ll have to; we all will,” answers Tom, beginning to move forwards again.
“Not you, Tom. You don’t have to do anything, technically we’re not your tribe.” I smile. “Is it very bad manners to say that I wish it was your tribe going through this and not ours?”
“If it was my tribe, we wouldn’t be in this position.”
His muttered words are soft, and for a second I think his statement has more than its surface meaning.
As we move into the Marshall territory I begin to notice its difference to our street, and the streets we have passed coming here. Our compound was a grey and dilapidated affair, surrounded by buildings that were no more than ruins. Here all the buildings look as though they are being used.
“Tom, who do these buildings belong to?”
“They’re Marshall lookout posts.”
“You mean they’re watching us right now?”
Tom nods, and I get the feeling that he doesn’t appreciate being observed.
“Their base is actually a complex of buildings with a courtyard in the centre, deep in the heart of their territory. With the lookout posts all around, it makes them very safe.”
“Is very safe, safe enough?”
“Let’s hope so.”
“Thanks, Tom, very reassuring.”
The Marshall complex is huge. It’s only opening is a heavily guarded double door, and as we approach we find ourselves face to face with more gun barrels than is entirely comfortable.
“So it’s you?”
The young man gives a signal, and the barrels are lowered fractionally. His back is to the light so I see him only in silhouette. He’s stocky, a little on the short side, but I have the overall impression of strength.
“Are you going to let us in or leave us to stand here all night, Gordon?” Jamie’s voice is icy, and Gordon’s manner changes from curious to insolence.
I guess it must be a bit more difficult for the Clarks; their pride has been touched more than the rest of us. It was Mr. Clark’s father who founded the tribe, did I tell you? Our tribal name is Clark.
Not now though; the Clarks have ceased to exist, just one more tribe that failed to survive.
“Of course not, you can leave the provisions there and we’ll take care of them.”
“What does he mean?” I whisper.
“The provisions will go into the Marshall store rooms, the Guard give out daily rations every morning.”
“You mean they’re taking our food away?”
My voice is loudly indignant, and Tom’s hand covers my mouth quickly.
“It isn’t ours, it’s community property now that we are all Marshalls, Deeta.”
We walk past the barricades, and across the short stretch of ground to the door of the building. There are several men lounging around a fire at the entrance, the flames play over their various weapons. As we pass they evince only minimum interest in us.
We enter into a great hall which, to my amazed eyes, seems to be carved from solid marble. Its ceiling is vaulted, with four marble pillars reaching up to support it. Before I can truly take in the splendour, we’ve moved through the hall and out into the courtyard. It’s spacious, sectioned into four areas with paths in between.

In one section I see livestock, and in another what looks like winter wheat. It is too dark to see the contents of the two further sections. As we reach the entrance to the other side I see a man step out of the shadows.

“Hello, Tom, Jamie.” He looks a little bewildered. “Who should I speak to?”

My father, Mr. Grey, and Mr. Clark step forwards.

“Your instructions should be addressed to these men, Mr. Alton,” replies Tom.

I screw my eyes up against the darkness, trying to see the man clearly. He’s short, a few inches shorter than I am, and he looks slightly stooped, suggesting that he is an older gentleman. Other than that I can’t tell much about him, still my curiosity is roused by the respect in Tom’s voice.

Mr. Alton inclines his head, and bids the tribe at large to move into the building.

Despite the fact that I hadn’t been cold outside, it’s nice to escape from the chill breeze. The hall is dimly lit with torches and lamps. Startled, I blink up at a huge marble staircase, before realising that the whole of the hall is paved in large marble slabs.

“These are the quarters that the council has assigned to you.” Mr Alton shifts uncomfortably. “It’s the first time that they’ve been used for anything but storage, so it hasn’t been converted as well. The rooms do not contain fires or kitchen facilities; all the cooking must be done in the kitchens here on the ground floor.” His tone is vaguely apologetic, and he looks uncomfortable. “We have provided you with all the blankets and cushions that we could spare, I hope they will be of help to you.”

“That was very kind, thank you.”

Mr. Clark’s voice is unusually subdued and Mr. Alton hovers nervously for a moment, before inclining his head and moving past us to the door.

“I’ll leave you to settle now.” He pauses uncertainly, one hand on the door knob. “I have been required to request the presence of your tribal Elders before the Marshall council tomorrow morning. Someone will be sent to fetch you.” He lingers as though he will say more, and then slides through the door as though to safety.

It is a relief to be alone and I hear the entire tribe releasing a held breath. I put the bag I’m carrying down, and slip the strap of the other from my shoulder. My shoes make a faint clicking noise as I walk across to the stairs. In places the brass spindles and handrail are green and have lost their shine. I trace a finger over the roughened surface.

“What sort of a place is this?” Jan’s voice is low as she too begins to ascend the steps close behind me.

“I don’t know, but it’s… nice, somehow…” I search for the right word.


“That’s it; cosy.”

The fire from the torches is bathing the hall in a warm light, sending dusky shadows dancing around the walls and floor. Looking up I can see ornate plaster mouldings on the ceiling, and a few gaps where it’s damaged. The stairs come to a landing and branch into opposite directions. We take the right side and find ourselves standing in a corridor. Cautiously I push open the first door I come to. It creaks on its hinges, and then swings inwards, but the room it opens on to is in complete darkness.

“We should have brought one of the torches with us,” laments Jan.
A flickering, warm glow comes down the passage towards us, and instinctively we move aside to let Tom pass. He touches the flames to a torch hanging from its bracket on the wall, and the room becomes visible.

There is a table with four chairs around it in, what closer inspection proves to be, walnut. A thick cream carpet, that bears many stains, covers the floor. A fireplace at one end of the room is flanked by two blue sofas. A large, deep pile rug in blue and cream covers the carpet between them. In the dim light it seems to have stood up to the ravages of life better than the light coloured carpet. The curtains, that fall from very tall windows to the floor, are in the same fabric that covers the chairs.

Despite the fact that all of these aforementioned things are unquestionably tatty, nothing can hide the fact that they were originally expensive items.

“What sort of place is this?” asks Jan again, as she fingers the heavy fabric of the hangings.

“It was originally an exclusive hotel. You couldn’t have afforded to stay here unless you had a ridiculous amount of disposable income.”

Tom moves to the door set in the wall across the other side of the room. It leads into a bedroom, opulently hung with embroidered cream velvet. An imposing canopy hangs above the large bed, the first thing that I see. It takes me several minutes to prize my gaze away from it.

“Will all the rooms be like this?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes, most of them; but the top floor will have been more expensive still.

“What a monstrosity!” Ralph’s voice startles me, the sound of his footsteps had been swallowed up by the carpet. “Alright, I suppose, if you don’t mind sleeping in something that wouldn’t look out of place in a harem.”

“I think it’s pretty,” says Jan. “And you can wipe that silly smile off your face, Ralph! I know just what you’re thinking, and you’ll be fortunate if I don’t tell your mother.”

“What me?” grins Ralph, holding his hands up in front of him. “I haven’t done anything.”

We wander back through to the hallway.

“Aunty Deet, have you seen the beds here? They’re huge!” Carris screeches to a halt in front of me and pulls me up the corridor. “The boys have gone up to explore the top floors; if we hurry we’ll catch up with them.”

She drags me through the door and into the stairwell. I can’t believe the difference between this one and our stairwell at home. The steps are richly carpeted and, though very soiled, it stands as a testament to past opulence. Even now the grandeur is still tangible, and it’s a stark contrast to the concrete that our staircase was made up of back at the Clark compound.

The door on the landing above us opens, and Ricky and Roydon emerge.

“Ricky, Ricky: wait for me!” pleads Carris, struggling to go faster.

Ricky stops halfway up the next flight, and turns to her, his hand outstretched.

“Oh! Hello everyone, are you all coming?” asks Ricky.

I’m startled to hear Tom reply behind me and, looking over my shoulder, find that behind him are Nella, Ralph, and Jan. I hadn’t heard them follow us.

Carris reaches Ricky and he takes her hand in his, beginning to climb the steps again.

“We’ve looked at three floors so far, but they’re all the same.” Roydon’s voice is disappointed.

I’m not sure what he expected to find but obviously it is something more exciting than he has yet seen.
The stairs stretch endlessly before us, and I begin to wonder if perhaps we should have stayed and got things ready for the night. At the moment we have no idea where our quarters are to be. My mind goes back to the rooms. I only saw one of course, but it had one sitting room, and one bedroom with a double bed.

I wonder vaguely where Jan, Clare, and I will sleep. Maybe on the sofas? Unfortunately there were only two, so one of us will get the floor. I look at Jan; it must be tough being the youngest.

The top floor hallway, when we finally reach it, is carpeted in red. That’s the only difference, so far as I can tell. As we come to the first door and push it open, Carris dances with impatience at the gloom. Tom again lights the lamp on the wall with his torch and the darkness vanishes to be replaced with a pinkish glow.

The room is a little bigger than the first room, draped in the same opulent way in saffron coloured material embroidered in cherry red. The seats are all matching, as before, but in this room the settees are more delicate, with ornate wooden legs. There’s a stool near the fire place, and an armchair next to the rug. The bedroom is dominated by a huge bed, draped in dark burgundy. To one side there is a chaise lounge, and on the other a beautiful dressing table.

At some point there has been a leak in the roof, and some of the furniture has been damaged. On the whole though, everything has stood up to the ravages of time well.

“It's a pity these rooms are up here, it makes them unusable,” says Nella, her voice a little regretful.

“We could move some of this stuff downstairs if you like,” offers Ralph.

Nella looks surprised.

“I guess you’re right, Ralph, maybe we could. For now we should be going back; it’s late and we have to find out who gets which rooms.”

There is a surprising amount of order as we get back down to the lower levels. I see Clare rushing down the hall with her arms full of blankets.

“Have we been allotted quarters yet?” I ask.

“Yes; you’re on the second floor. You’d better get some blankets and stuff from downstairs first though.”

Jan and I stagger into our rooms, arms over flowing with blankets and pillows.

“Where do you want these, Mum?”

“Not in here, through that door; it’s a twin room.”

Jan and I exchange glances.

“That’s Janny on the floor then, is it? Or could we move one of those settees into the twin for her?” I ask.

Mother tucks a blanket under the mattress; she doesn’t look at us as she speaks.

“No, Janny will share the twin room with you.”

“What about Clare?” asks Jan.

“Clare will stay with her husband; they have a room further down the hall.”

“That’s ok for when they are married, but what about now?”

“They are married,” answers my mother.

“What!”

The exclamation breaks from me and Jan at roughly the same time.

“Be quiet!” hisses my mother, she turns to us and whispers quietly. “Philip talked to your father; we don’t know about the laws here, they may not allow Philip and Clare to marry. Clare is very pretty, and one of the Marshalls may take a liking to her. To save any trouble Mr. Clark married them in front of your father and Mr. Grey twenty minutes ago. There’s nothing the Marshalls can do now, and if anyone asks, they’ve been married for six months.”
There is silence as we stand, feeling cold and threatened by the Marshalls, by their power and the fact that they are an unknown entity.

“Was it necessary?” whispers Jan.

“I don’t think they wanted to wait and find out,” answers our mother. “Now come on girls; it’s late. Go and set your bedroom to rights and then go to bed.”

“What do you think? That she’ll have sprouted donkey ears since you last saw her?”

“No, but—”

“No but nothing,” states my mother flatly. “Clare’s just got married; the only person she wants to see is her husband. You’d be decidedly de trop, now go to bed.”

“Can I go and check on the children first?”

My mother heaves a large sigh.

“Yes, you’d better take Jan. Those poor children should have been in bed hours ago.”

Jan and I race up the corridor to the Jepsjons apartments, and find Roydon and Ricky helping Tom to make up the beds. Carris is rummaging through the bundles trying to find their night things. She looks relieved as we enter.

“Did either of you pack the pyjamas? I don’t know which bag they’re in.” She spreads her hands out in front of her helplessly, and looks from one to the other of us.

“I think I put them in the… yes, here they are.” I pick out the parcel, and throw it into her waiting arms, before moving through to where the boys are efficiently making beds.

“Tom, where’s the water?” I ask. He glances over his shoulder, surprised to see me.

“There’s no running water up here, but I brought some up from downstairs; it’s in a pail in the sink.”

“Thanks. Come on then girls; let’s get those faces washed and those teeth scrubbed.”

I pick Tarri up; she’s holding her toothbrush in one hand and her nightshirt in the other. Her curly black pigtails are askew, and her eyes heavy with sleep.

“Come on, baby, you can go to sleep soon.”

“I’m not tired,” she asserts, rubbing her eyes.

I place her on the side before taking the pail out of the sink. After securing the plug, I tip some of the icy cold water into the basin. Tarri flinches a little as the flannel comes into cold contact with her warm face.

“Are we going to stay here very long, Aunty Deet?” she asks suddenly.

“Of course we are, dolly; this is our home now.”

“And the people?” she asks around her toothbrush.

“What about them?”

“Well, what if I don’t like them?”

The comb I’m pulling through her hair wobbles.

“Why wouldn’t you like them?”

Tarri shimmies round on the side until she can lean over and spit into the sink.

“I don’t know, but supposing I don’t?”

“I think you’d better ask uncle Tom about that.”

I plait her hair neatly and tie the end, then pull her round to face me.

“Don’t worry about it, Tarri. No matter what, your uncle Tom will make sure you’re safe and happy.”

When we enter the living room, Jan is just finishing Carris’ hair.

“Where are we going to put them?” she asks.

“The girls get the big bed,” answers Tom, entering the room.
His leather jacket has been discarded, and he’s wearing a heavy woollen jumper, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He looks tired and pale in the way he always does when exhausted.

“Is there anything else that needs to be done?” I ask.

“No, the rest can wait until tomorrow.” He rubs his eyes in a boyish gesture that strikes me as very attractive. Strange, because I’ve seen him do it plenty of times before and never really noticed.

“In the big bed?” asks Jan.

“The boys said they weren’t sleeping in a girly bed so they’ll sleep in here on the sofas; Uncle Jep and I will take the twin for now.”

“Come on then, girls, let’s get you into bed.”

The girls run to where Tom leans against the door, and he bends to kiss and hug each of them. It’s the first time I’ve seen them go to bed quite so willingly. Jan and I tuck them in and kiss their soft cheeks before leaving them to sleep. As I pass through the door Tom reaches out and takes my arm, before looking to where Jan stands near the door ready to leave.

“You were a great help, Janny.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And you, Deeta, the girls will sleep better for having seen you.”

“Talking of sleep I’m off to find some, g’night Tommy.” Jan waves an airy goodbye and leaves the room.

Tom shakes his head, a smile pulling at his lips.

“You know; Jan’s one of only two people in the whole world who call me Tommy.”

Through my jumper I can feel the warmth of his hand on my skin; it’s a strangely searing heat.

“Who’s the other one?”

“My brother Rye.” His gaze returns to me and alters, and he drops my arm abruptly.

“Sleep well, Deeta.”

He turns and, before I can reply, has vanished into the twin room.
Chapter Thirteen

Deeta

“Deeta! I thought I told you to go to bed?” My mother’s voice is faintly irritated and she pushes me towards the twin room. “You’ll be shattered tomorrow as it is, now go to sleep.”

I feel her kiss my cheek, and then she bundles me into my room, shutting the door firmly behind me. Jan is sitting in the middle of her bed brushing her hair; I hear her reach a count of fifty and then change hands.

“It feels odd doesn’t it?”

Although I hear her question, it takes a moment to sink in.

“Yes, I suppose it does.”

I move to sit on my bed, and start to pull my jumper over my head. I’ve changed into my pyjamas before she speaks again.

“I feel as if something should happen, as if there should be something more.” She puts her comb down on to the bedside table and hugs her knees.

“I know what you mean; after all that’s happened, to go to sleep seems like an anticlimax.” I climb into bed and turn to lay on my front, propped up by my pillow.

“I think it’s been good for us, in a way.” Jan leans back, and gazes at the ceiling.

“You and Tommy have gotten over your little tiff…”

“We didn’t have a little tiff, Janny!”

“Clare has finally gotten spliced…”

“I assume you mean married?”

“And last, but by no means least, we have more victims to fill the hunk pool. I think you’ll agree it has been sadly deficient! I predict interesting consequences.”

“You’re a bad girl, Jan, leave the poor boys alone. Didn’t mum tell you not to flirt?”

“I don’t flirt; I socialise with intent!”

“Which is, of course, totally different?” I ask.

“ Entirely.”

I shake my head, and in the silence that ensues turn on to my back and stare at the ceiling. A thousand and one worries coalesce in my mind, unsettling thoughts that I don’t want to face. What happens next? Are we really safe? What about Dec? Is he alright? Is he scared and unhappy? More importantly; how are we ever going to get him back?

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I don’t know at what point we fell asleep last night, but neither of us stir until mum comes in to wake us. Yesterday’s work, last night’s stressful trek, and our preparations on our arrival, had tired us out more than we’d known. Yet now it’s back
to the mundane; there is breakfast to be made, and I didn’t even look at the kitchens
last night. It’s quite possible that they will need a good clean before we attempt to use
them.

Dragging ourselves out of bed to the prospect of dressing in a freezing cold room is
almost too difficult to contemplate. Somehow we manage it, and negotiate our way
down the hall to the grand staircase. The cold light of day is not as kind as the warm
glow of lamps had been. This morning I can see the shabbiness that had been hidden
last night.

“Does anyone even know where the kitchen is?” asks Jan, as she pulls her hair into a
ponytail.

“It’s off the corridor through that door,” answers our mother, leading the way across
the hall.

The kitchen is huge, sunken down two steps, with a very high ceiling. Metal
cupboards line two walls, a range fills the other, and a metal surface with three sinks
is stretched across the last. There is a very large metal topped island in the middle of
the room.

“Hello, Gloria, how do things look?”

Mrs. Clark’s smile is relieved as she bids us hello.

“It’s clean, which is the main thing, and Tom and Ralph went over to the depot and
managed to get rations for the whole tribe. The Guard said tomorrow we’ll have to
queue like everyone else.”

“They must have been up at the crack of dawn to sort that out!” exclaims Jan, tying
a tea towel around her waist.

“Goodness yes, I was down here at half past six and the boys had already sorted it
out, and were bringing the provisions in,” answers Mrs. Clark, kneading bread
vigorously. Flour covers the front of her apron, and a tendril of hair has escaped from
the French plait running down the back of her head. Every few words are punctuated
with the sound of her blowing it from her eyes.

“Where are they now?” I ask, searching through the cupboards to find a bowl.

“Tom went to get the children ready, and Ralph is helping Nella down with some
furniture from the rooms on the top floor.”

The glass bowl I’m holding rattles a little as I place it on the side, and my startled
eyes collide with my mother’s. She shakes her head at me, and I stifle the involuntary
exclamation that rises to my lips. Turning back to my work I try not to smile. After
all, it only took a small war to bring them together.

It’s strange how everything has changed. If someone had told me a week ago that we
would be here in this new place, part of another much larger tribe, that I would
have been ‘out’, and that Ralph and Nella would be moving furniture together, I would
have called for a straightjacket and the men in white coats.

Yet it isn’t only that; it isn’t only Nella and Ralph who have changed, we all have,
even me. So much, and in so many ways, I can’t enumerate. The only constant has
been Tom. Through all of this confusion he has remained unshakable and calm,
knowing exactly what to do. It’s weird, but in practically every book I’ve ever read
someone has been ‘coldly calculating’. Why does calculation always appear in such a
bad light? Tom is at his most impressive and useful when employing his brain in a
calculating way. In fact, it’s one of the best ways to describe him. He is steady, cool,
calm, and yes, calculating.

And yet, that isn’t really doing him justice. Although he is every one of those things
he is, I don’t know, somehow more. It’s just that side of him is all most people ever
see, it’s his projected image, if you like. The other, different side of him, is hidden
deep within, seen only by the children and Uncle Jep, and through them by the rest of us whom he calls his friends.

“It’s funny how all we ever see of people is the things that they want us to see. They hide the rest, the part of themselves that if you saw, you could truly say you knew them.”

“That’s very deep for this time of the morning, dear.” My mother’s voice is half amused, and I blush. I hadn’t realised I was speaking out loud.

“You needn’t look quite so depressed about it, Deet.” Jan’s words are soft so that only I hear them. “If you intend to get any kind of stiffness into those egg whites, you should try moving the whisk.” Something in her eyes makes me feel that she knows my thoughts.

Jan has always been like that; capable of seeing things that are hidden from most people. Sometimes I think that Jan is wiser than me and Clare put together, with an innate wisdom that I don’t quite understand.

The morning passes quickly. At around half past twelve a messenger arrives from the Marshall Council, requiring that the tribal Elders should go with him. My father, Mr. Clark, and Mr. Grey leave with him, taking Tom, Jamie, and Ralph along. I think it’s more to swell the ranks than anything else.

The rest of us spend the time waiting, and setting our new home to rights. The men bring furniture down from the upper rooms to put in the communal rooms downstairs, and us women scrub everything in sight. The heavily stained carpets, and the walls of the great dining room and sitting room are filthy. It isn’t until we are halfway through scrubbing down the hallway, that the others come back.

“Even think of stepping on the floor and I’ll strangle you with my apron strings!” Nella warns as she sits back on her heels and pushes an errant curl out of her eyes. “What did they want?”

As she gets to her feet she sways slightly, and Ralph puts out a hand to steady her. Nella grimaces and stretches her back.

“Oh, will I ever stand straight again?”

“What happened, Ralphie?”

Ralph rocks back and forth on his heels for a moment or two, driving his hands deep into his trouser pockets.

“It looks much better in here; you must have worked hard all morning.”

“Stop being difficult.”

“I think you’d better wait and hear it from the Elders,” answers Ralph.

Mine and Janny’s cloths follow Nella’s, and then suddenly, struck by the same thought, we rise.

“I think I’ll go and make a drink,”

“I’ll help, Janny.” I call, running after her.

The kitchen is full when we enter it. In the middle of the crowd I see the Elders talking quietly together. Over in the corner Tom is leaning against the wall, talking seriously with Uncle Jep. Without thinking I make my way towards them, Jan close behind me. Tom levers himself upright as we approach. It’s a habit he’s got, and something which I’ve always thought courteous. I never realised until just now, that it’s actually an unfriendly gesture of withdrawal.

“Hello, Tom, how did things go?”

“As expected,” answers Tom.

“Your explanatory prowess is unbeaten, Tommy,” laughs Jan.
“You’ll hear about it soon enough,” replies Tom. He has hardly finished his sentence when Mr. Clark stands and calls for quiet.

“The Marshalls were kind enough to explain to us the laws by which their tribe is governed, this morning. It will mean changes to all of us. Firstly there are greenhouses and animals to be cared for, which we shall be assigned to by rota. Also they have a system of daily rationing which will mean that every person, including children, will have to queue at the storage depot every morning for their food for the day. The provisions that we brought along with us, including the animals, are now communal property and have been added to the stores and livestock already here.”

There is a general murmur of unrest at this juncture, and Mr. Clark raises a hand to silence it.

“I think we should all remember that we too are Marshalls now, and that in our hour of need they have helped us. Every law that they have asked us to abide by is fair, and no more than what they live by themselves.” He pauses allowing us to think over this for a second.

“There is also a draft; all persons from the age of thirteen upwards must be ready to act in the tribe. Now, we explained how things worked in our own tribe, and that some of us had no training. The Marshall council proved very understanding; they have agreed that those in our guard will take up duties immediately. Those who have not had any experience are exempt from duties outside the compound for twelve weeks whilst they are trained. For a further twelve weeks after that, they will be on active duty only within Marshall territory.”

I turn to Tom, a slight frown drawing my brows together.

“You expected that?”

“The Marshalls aren’t stupid. Our amalgamation into their tribe is at its most vulnerable now. To be unreasonable and harsh would cost them a great deal. Showing a little understanding costs them very little and earns them a lot of brownie points.”

“You make something kind sound mercenary.”

Tom’s eyes narrow as he looks at me.

“That’s because it is.”

I fancy I hear the sound of admiration in his words. Shades of his father perhaps? An unpleasant shiver runs the length of my spine and bite my tongue. I’m horrified that even I have been tainted by the hate that is directed towards the Andak, that I could besmirch Tom in my own mind with such glib thoughts.

“Deeta?” Jan’s hand on my arm shows her concern. “Are you alright?”

“Fine, I’m fine.”

I look up to find Tom’s eyes upon me and have a funny feeling that he followed the direction of my thoughts. I look away, embarrassed.

Things change. I guess it’s in the nature of ‘things’ to change, but to have changed this much and this quickly leaves me feeling very lost and alone. It isn’t a feeling that I like, but for Tom I guess it’s a way of life; maybe he doesn’t even feel it any more. For some stupid reason the thought that Tom is impervious to the pain is horribly depressing, more so than the thought that he is suffering in his loneliness.

Everything has gotten so messed up. I used to be happy, but not now. I don’t feel like laughing any more; I just feel tired, all the time so tired and weighed down. Yet worse are the times when I’m numb and feel nothing at all.

Suddenly I’m angry; white hot, burning angry, because I can’t do anything. Dec is gone, dragged off by strangers, all alone and scared, and what can I do about it?

Nothing.

Zip.
An exhausting rage floods through me at my helplessness, at knowing that there is nothing I can do. As for Tom, that’s another thing. I never knew how much I depended on Tom. Somehow my friendship with him is different than those with Nell and Ralph. In a way it seems more important. Yet now, just when I need him most, when I need to cling to his strength, he has deserted me. I feel lost and bewildered and... betrayed. We carry on a façade of friendship, and yet deep down we are not connected at all. And guess what? That’s right; there’s nothing I can do about that either! Tom just isn’t interested in things going back to the way they were. Why, I don’t know. Maybe he just put up with me for all those years; not really wanting me around, but not wanting to tell the kid who had decided to cling to him and his family like a human limpet, to get lost. The thought is mortifying to the highest degree. I come to myself, and the sense of my surroundings, to find a large teardrop has fallen from my bowed face. It spreads a dark stain over my blouse. I hear Tom straighten and excuse himself, and sense rather than see Uncle Jep’s hand move out towards him. Whether he catches Tom’s attention or not I don’t know, I only know that Tom carries on walking. “I think we’d better get back to our scrubbing, don’t you Jan?” My voice is rough in that horrible way that confirms to everyone you’ve been crying. Janny walks with me back to where our scrubbing brushes and bowls of water lay as we left them. She chatters pleasantly of nothing in particular, careful to make answering unnecessary. It’s only as we again start work that she stops talking and begins to sing. Janny’s voice is very sad when she sings and the song that she has chosen is very depressing, doing little to lighten my mood. It is several moments before I realise that her soft voice has stopped. “Deet, you would not believe the prime specimen that has just walked in.” I look up to see a particularly good looking young man conversing with Mrs. Trayman by the front door. “You’re right, he’s very good looking,” I answer disinterestedly. I see Mrs. Trayman smile and point in our direction, and the man thanks her before coming our way. “Deet, I think that Marshall is going to try and chat us up.” Jan’s voice is amused and mocking. Her words bring a feeling of dread to settle in my stomach. A moment later he stands before us. “Hello again, Deeta.” He smiles as he comes to a halt in front of us. “You’re even prettier in daylight.” “Robin!” At the sound of my startled voice his face creases into a smile, and he thrusts his hands into his jacket pockets. “So you do remember.” I blush. Of course I remember. I remember exactly how awkward it had been. “This is my sister, Jan. Jan this is Robin… we met briefly last night.” “Brief but sweet, Deeta.” I blush again, uncomfortable with his brash familiarity. He seems to notice belatedly, and holds up his hands in front of him.
“Okay, okay; no more sweet stuff. How did things go last night, did you have all you needed?”

“Yes, everything was fine, thank you.”

Robin nods and looks around.

“Kate came through with a few of the women yesterday, they didn’t have much time, but they pretty much straightened things out. Still it looks better for a scrub down; I’d forgotten that the walls were cream in here.”

“Who’s Kate?”

Robin looks vaguely uncomfortable.

“She’s a girl I know… well she sort of… I mean it’s not like she’s just any girl, because she’s kind of…” Robin breaks off clearing his throat. “She’s my girl.”

He shifts awkwardly, looking away and beginning to whistle.

“Have you been a Marshall long?” asks Jan, taking pity on him.

“Twenty six years and seven months,” replies Robin.

“And that’s a cryptic way of saying?”

“All my life; my name is Robin Marshall.”

For a second no one says anything, and Robin grins.

“Ouch; that was a conversation stopper!”

In the distance I hear Clare calling Jan. Janny smiles, excusing herself.

“Are you sure you have everything you need?”

I hear genuine concern in Robin’s voice.

“We’re fine; in fact it’s beautiful here, everything is.” I smile thinking back to our tattered blue rug and beat up sofas.

“Say…” Robin looks around apprehensively. “Your boyfriend isn’t around is he? I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“You don’t? But, that guy you were with last night…”

“Tom,” I interject.

“So that was who it was! It was so dark I couldn’t tell… come to think of it he called me by name, didn’t he? Should’ve known it was Tom.” His face takes on a vaguely hunted expression. “This just keeps getting worse; did you say you weren’t an item?”

I shake my head and he relaxes again, but still there is a worried furrow between his brows.

“Deeta, would you take a bit of advice? Keep quiet about the fact that you have no boyfriend. In fact, make one up. Laying claim to the best lookers of a new tribe is a time honoured Marshall tradition; you and that pretty sister of yours had better be careful.”

I don’t know why, but I get the impression that this ‘time honoured tradition’ is not one he takes part in. Unaccountably I feel much more at ease with him.

“We’ll be careful, thanks for the warning.”

“Good girl, now are you sure there isn’t something you need?”

“I don’t think so, but thanks, Robin.”

“Well if there is, just tell me and I’ll have it added to your daily ration.”

“You can do that?”

“My family founded this tribe, one day I’ll be head Elder. What’s the point of having all that influence and not pulling some strings now and then?” Robin smiles and salutes. “I’ve got to get going. Be seeing you, Deeta, and remember what I said.”

He waves a cheerful goodbye, and vanishes into the courtyard. After a few moments deliberation I decide I like Robin Marshall.

“Making new friends, Deeta?”
I jump at the sound of Tanya’s voice.
“I suppose I was; he was asking if there was anything we needed.”
“I’d be careful if I were you, goodness only knows what he’ll want in return.”
“Tanya!” I flush red, angry, and embarrassed by her snide innuendo. “He just wanted to make sure we were comfortable, that all of us are comfortable.”
“Yeah, whatever. Trust me, Deeta; he spells trouble.”
“I think that’s a little harsh…”
“That’s the trouble, Deeta; you’re not such an authority are you? You thought Tomasz was fine, and look what he turned out to be; a slimy Andak!” A spiteful glint enters her eyes. “He’s ruined you, you know. None of the boys will want you now, not after…” Her voice trails off suggestively, and she looks after Robin. “Come to think of it; perhaps you should be nice to that Marshall. Or had you already thought of that?”

I watch in silence as she walks away, a self satisfied smile plastered over her face. I’m horribly aware that everyone in the hallway is looking at me, but not meeting my eyes. Dropping the cloth I’m holding, I walk sedately toward the stairs.

I don’t have any destination in mind, but feel a kind of numbness come over me. Everything disappears: there’s no thought, no pain, not even the sensation of passing time.

I come to a sense of my surroundings to find myself face to face with a large door. From its shape and size I know that it is the door to the roof, my often used place of refuge. The handle puts up resistance in my fingers, and with both hands I begin to pull madly at its unresponsive locks. The tears are coursing down my face as I beat a rhythmless tattoo against the hard wood.

I cry for everything in those moments. I cry for Dec and for Keya, for Jamie’s misery, and Tom’s coldness, for the huge and strange changes that have tangled us all in their intricate web. My fist is suddenly arrested in a warm, firm clasp, and I’m turned and pulled into a comforting embrace. Only one person I know radiates the comfort that I can feel tangible in the air, and I allow myself to relax in Tom’s arms.

For a while my shuddering sobs continue, his left arm around my waist remains tight, while his right hand smooths my hair back from my face. Yet even tears must stop eventually, and I become quiet.

“I didn’t mean to be silly, Tom, it just—”
“I saw, Deeta.”

I lean against him, absorbing the kindness and gentleness of him, just as I absorb his warmth. Tom understands, he understands what I can’t even put into words, and his understanding is a relief. I stand there with my head resting against his shoulder, and time rolls back so that I don’t feel awkward. My next question is as frank as we have always been with each other.

“Are we good, Tom?”
“Yes, Deeta. We’re good.”

He draws away from me, and hands me his handkerchief. I take it from him, wiping my eyes.

“Is my face red and puffy?”
“Honesty decrees that I say yes.”
“I thought so… thanks, Tom.”
“What for?”
“For being there when I need you most. That’s what matters isn’t it; being there for your friends when things are tight?”
“I guess so.”
He puts his arm around my shoulders, and we begin to walk down to the lower levels. Outside my door he does something he’s never done before. He leans forwards and kisses my cheek, much like he would have kissed Tarri or Carris.

“Goodbye, Deeta, be good.”
Chapter Fourteen

Deeta

You know, nothing in his manner or words caused me a moment’s unease. I wonder if that’s what’s making it hurt so much; that it seems so unexplainable. Somehow I feel as though Tom lied to me. Every action, every word, told me that things would be fine, that I had no need to worry.

Well guess what, Tom; this isn’t alright! There are no circumstances in which I would term this fine. Do you have any idea how mad I am at you? How angry, and hurt, and frustrated I am?

Why?
Would it have been so hard to tell me?
How could you?

Why was it possible for you to just walk away without a word or an explanation; you didn’t even leave a note! It needn’t have been for me; it could have been a message to the tribe in general, I’m not picky. But no, you sneak off into the night with Uncle Jep and the children like some sort of thief.

Jan is standing beside me in the rations queue, strangely silent, and I can tell from the sidelong looks she keeps giving me that she's worried.

“Go on, Jan; say it.”
She jumps, I don’t think that she’d known that I was aware of her scrutiny.

“I was just thinking; he probably had a good reason for what he did, Deeta.” Her voice is carefully modulated to be as inoffensive as possible.

“I know that, Janny, it just doesn’t seem to make me feel any better.”

Jan’s hand slides into mine, her warm clasp immeasurably comforting.

“Hello?” The voice is warm and softly accented. “You are Deeta, no?”
I turn to find myself looking into a pair of chocolate brown eyes.

“I am, but…”

“But who am I?” She smiles at me and Jan.

“My name is Catalina.” She seems to expect some sort of reaction, and on receiving none she looks a little perplexed. “Oh, but you will probably know me as Kate?”

“You’re Robin’s —” I begin.

“Friend!” Catalina jumps in quickly, looking over her shoulder. “Yes, that’s me. Robin asked me to make sure you were alright, so amigas, are you okay?”

“Yes, we’re fine.”

“Good.” She smiles again. “This must be very strange to you, no?” Her hands make a gesture that encompasses the queue, the desk, and several people in charge of meting out our rations.

“A little.” I admit. “Catalina, Robin said you prepared our quarters for us?”

She nods.
“Was there something wrong?”
“No, not at all; I just wanted to say thank you.”
Catalina’s face takes on a rosy hue, and she mumbles something in Spanish.
“It was so little a thing, I wish there had been time to do more. Robin says that the place looks good now, he said he found you scrubbing.”
“I don’t know why but cleaning and arranging…it just makes you feel like you belong more, doesn’t it?”
There is an awkward silence, and I begin to wish that I hadn’t put that thought into words. Catalina reaches out and rests her hand on my arm; her eyes are warm and understanding.
“At first it is hard, but it will be better. Believe me; it was strange for me too.”
“You’re not a Marshall?” asks Jan.
Catalina raises her hand to her lips in a gesture of silence, and shoots a hasty look around the surrounding people.
“It is best, mi querida, that you do not say these things. We are all Marshalls here.” Her anxious face breaks into a smile. “I am sorry, queridas; it’s new for you, but some things are best to leave unspoken.” She leans forwards as if to conspire. “The name of my tribe is Rodriguez; it was founded by my family. What is yours?”
“Clark, but our family name is Richards.”
“For the time being anyway,” states Jan dryly. “It could get a whole lot more interesting in the future.”
“Jan!”
The embarrassment in my voice serves only to make Jan smile and Catalina curious.
“You are promised, Deeta?” Her voice is teasing. “But you must tell me who he is?” I feel a fiery blush crawling up my neck.
“Jan is speaking generally, I’m promised to no one.”
“Do you know anything about Tom’s leaving?” asks Jan suddenly.
“Tom? Who is Tom?”
“A friend of ours; he and his family left last night,” answers Jan.
Catalina’s eyes light up eagerly.
“Ah, yes: El Hombre de secretos…but he was not meant to stay.”
“What do you mean he wasn’t meant to stay?”
Catalina still looks bemused.
“Catalina, what is it?” I ask.
“No.” She takes my hand and pulls me out of the queue. “No es posible habar aqui, hay que ir tranquilo donde algunos, but not here, we must find Robhino.”
She pulls me across the square towards one of the other buildings, the door is heavily guarded.
“Is Robin inside, Jay?”
There are five men stationed around the door, but none of them reacts, so I can’t tell which of them she is talking to.
“Jay? Jay!”
A young man with brown hair and freckles prizes his eyes from Jan, and turns to Catalina.
“What?”
“Robin…is he inside?” Catalina’s voice is terse.
“No, he’s not.” Jay turns back to Jan. “Hi.”
“Where is he, do you know?” Catalina continues.
“What’s your name?” Jay’s eyes are firmly fixed on Jan’s face in an intense way that makes him appear as though he’s in the grip of indigestion.
“Jay, could you please try to concentrate; do you know where Robin has gone?”
Jay turns back to her, blinking as though his eyes have been blinded by some dazzling sight.
“Yeah sure, he went to the Johnsons; they’ve been threatening to break the trade agreement. Robin’s gone to sort them out.”
“When will he be back?”
“I don’t know, Kate.”
“Great, he would be away now, just because I need him,” Catalina mumbles.
“Come, Deeta, Jan; we must talk, but not here… I’ll take you to my apartments.”
She turns briefly to thank Jay, and then we move off in the direction of the south building.
“Hey wait, you never did tell me your name, blondie!” calls Jay.
“Didn’t I? How rude of me,” Smiles Jan, as she walks away.
Catalina’s house is in the south building, and I notice as we enter that it has a more lived in feel. The hall is full of playing children, and as we climb the stairs they call out to her. On the landing there is a group of women talking together, they hail Catalina affectionately as she passes them, but I find their eyes upon me to be too curious to be comfortable.
Finally we reach Kate’s apartment. She closes the door behind us and leans against it, her eyes closed, expelling a long slow breath before opening them again.
“Now, queridas, it is safe to talk.” She smiles. “You look confused, but things are different here. Although we are all Marshalls we still live segregated in our own tribes, and of course the different tribes gossip about each other. Sometimes there are… differences… between the different factions. You will find that my tribe is particularly troublesome; my father sits on the Marshall board, and there is nothing he likes better than making trouble for Peter Marshall.”
She gestures that we should sit down.
“He is Robin’s father, querida.”
“I see that we’ll have to be careful.”
“Yes, Deeta, you will have to be very careful. We have an easier life than most, more time. I am afraid that, for the most part, that time is spent for bad and not for good.”
“The problem between your fathers must be hard on you and Robin?”
Catalina looks up, startled, and I see her lips tremble.
“More than hard, querida; impossible. If Robin and I made our feelings public, our fathers would rip this tribe apart with their bitterness.”
“I’m sorry, I thought… I mean Robin said…” Tongue tied I stammer to an abrupt halt.
“I know. Robhino is stubborn, he says; one day. I keep telling him that we will both be old and grey before ‘one day’, but he only says, so? and becomes more obstinate.”
Her smile is tender and her eyes filled with glistening tears.
“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”
“Don’t worry, querida.” She pats my hand. “But this was not why you came; you have a question, no?”
“No. I means yes! You see; one of the families in our tribe left last night, and we don’t know why. We wondered if perhaps…”
My voice trails off. What was it that I wanted her to say?
“But of course I know of this; it was all decided before you even came here.”
“What do you mean?” My voice is a sharper than I had meant it to be, and Kate looks uncertain.
“Is it best that you speak to Robin of this—”
“Please, Catalina, tell me; why did Tom go?”
“I’m not sure… I only know what Robhino told me. Apparently your friend said that the trouble that had come to your tribe was following him, and that he would not bring it also upon us.”
I feel the breath catch dryly in my throat.
All the time he knew they would follow him; would they never stop? I realise that Tom has answered this question by his departure. No, they’ll never give up, not until they’ve found him.
“He made sure we would be safe first.”
The action of protecting us even as he knew that he would have to leave us is so very like him, full of the belief that somehow he is responsible for us all. Janny reaches across and takes my hand in hers.
“The boy’s a gent, you have to give him that.”
A heavy knock at the door startles us all, and after a moment’s hesitation Catalina moves forward to open it.
“Jay? What do you want?” Her obvious surprise makes the question more direct than friendly.
“Robin’s back; he sent me over to fetch you to headquarters.”
“I see.” Kate takes her coat from the peg by the door, and motions to us to join her.
For the second time that day we stand before the guard in front of the Marshall building, and are led by Jay to a suite of rooms on the fifth floor.
“Sorry to keep you waiting, girls.” Robin’s greeting is perfunctory, and his smile saved for Kate. “Jay said you wanted to speak to me?”
“Deeta and Jan are curious about the man who left last night; they wondered why he went.”
“Tom? Surely he told you, or at least the Elders of your tribe?”
“He just disappeared without a word to any of us, but Catalina said he told you why he left?” I answer.
“Sure he did, he made it very clear from the beginning that he wouldn’t stay.” Robin hesitates uncomfortably. “Look I don’t want upset either of you, but he explained that there were people after him.”
“He told you?” My voice is incredulous.
“Yes, I thought it was very brave and honest of him at the time; he needn’t have said a word.”
“But… don’t you mind? Don’t you hold it against him at all?”
“Why would I? It isn’t any of my business,” replies Robin defensively.
“It wasn’t any of our tribe’s business either, but when they found out Tom was Andak they didn’t display your understanding!” I retort.
There is a few moments silence, the sort that you can hear just as loud as any tumult.
Robin’s brown eyes focus sharply on my face.
“Tom is Andak?” The lips which frame his question are bloodlessly white. I think even as I finished my sentence I knew that Robin had not been told.
Sixteen years Tom has kept his secret.
I only managed a few days.
I stand frozen, and stare into Robin’s eyes in dismay, trying to see the feelings and thoughts running through his mind.
“Answer me!” His voice is impatient and harsh. “Is Tomasz Jepsjon, Andak?”
Fear closes my throat so that I can only stare at him with wild, frightened eyes. He stands abruptly, and I realise that although he is only average in height, he looks very strong. Slowly I back away from him. Some of his anger seems to fade and he lifts his hand, blanching as I flinch away from him.

“No, Deeta! Don’t do that!” He holds both hands up in front of him in entreaty. “Don’t look at me like I was going to hurt you.”

“Perhaps if you hadn’t looked fit to murder her, she wouldn’t have the wrong idea.” Jan’s voice is cold.

“But I never even thought of it; you must know that!” exclaims Robin, shocked.

“Robin, we know nothing about you,” replies Jan tartly. “You make it sound as though we have known each other for years instead of days.”

“It wasn’t you, I wasn’t angry at you… but him!” His hands clench into fists. “If I ever see him again I’ll…”

“Get the enthusiasm for a fight soundly beaten out of you?” interjects Jan, observing the twitching of his fingers. “I would think twice before you submit yourself quite willingly to the… experience… that Tom would no doubt put you through. Or are you under the impression that you have a chance of mastering Tom? How very quaint of you, but you are grossly mistaken.”

Jan’s voice is slightly amused and vaguely mocking, for a second Robin’s face is suffused by a rosy glow.

“He had no right to put us in such danger.”

“Tom brought us here so that we would be safe!” I assure him.

“You might be safer, but we are in a lot of trouble!” Robin chafes.

Suddenly I’m very cold. It’s happening again; we have suddenly become ‘them’ and ‘us’, two completely different groups of people.

“What sort of trouble?”

“Deeta, have you any idea what sort of people the Andak are? They have weaponry and technology that we can’t even imagine. If Tom is running from them, woe betide anyone who stands in their way! And just in case you still don’t understand, Deeta; the Marshalls are slap bang in their way.”

“They’re going to come for us you mean?”

“Yes, Deeta, they are most assuredly coming for us.”

“But we can hold them off… with your…”

“Haven’t you been listening to a word I’ve said? We haven’t a chance; no hope at all!” His voice is loud, causing me to shrink away from him a little.

“Tom wouldn’t leave us here to die.”

“Wake up, Deeta; he’s Andak. There’s a reason why his name is a byword for everything that’s vile!”

The sound is like a gunshot, and the full force of my arm behind my hand forces his head sideways. In the silence that follows I watch Robin’s cheek turn an angry red.

“Nice one, Deet.” Jan comes to stand beside me. “If I’d been closer I’d have had a go myself.”

Robin is tense and angry, but with control that I find admirable, he speaks again.

“I appreciate that Tom was a friend…”

“Is a friend,” interjects Jan.

“I appreciate that Tom is your friend, but you have to face facts!”

“Tom didn’t bring us here to die.”

“Deeta, please…” Robin’s tone is beseeching.

“He didn’t!” I maintain.

“Deeta, you have to trust me on this.”
“Trust you?” Violently I pull my arm from his seeking hand. “Why would I trust you, a man I know nothing about and who I met just a few short days ago, above Tom, a man I have known and called a friend for sixteen years? I have less reason to believe you than you have reason to believe me!”

Robin is quiet for a moment, turning my words over in his head. I can see him weighing pros and cons, truth and lies. Suddenly his eyes snap into focus, and before he speaks I know what he is going to say.

“Now, Deeta…” He begins gently, sympathy and understanding oozing from every pore. “I know…”

“I don’t fancy Tom.” My voice is blunt. “We are not an item, we do not have an arrangement or an understanding; he’s just a friend who happens to be male.”

On hearing the irritation in my voice I see an element of doubt creep into his eyes. It was never very strong, and one look at Catalina banishes it completely.

“But there is an understanding; he is the one of whom you were talking, no?” Her eyes flick over Jan before turning to rest on Robin. “Jan was teasing her; she said that in the future Deeta’s last name would be very interesting.”

The room pretty much turns into bedlam at this point as we all try to speak at once. I don’t know how the interview would have ended if Jan hadn’t interrupted when she did.

“You’re missing the point!” Her voice somehow has the effect of silencing us all. “We could argue all day about Deeta’s romantic issues, but the truth of the matter is that whether or not Tom and Deeta are involved has no bearing on the situation. It doesn’t account for my firm and unshakable belief that Tom is doing what he thinks is best for us. Maybe Deeta could, out of affection, be blinded to Tom’s true nature. I could not. Whatever Tom has done he has done for our sakes.”

Robin is silent again. He stares through Jan, as though he is here in body, but not in spirit.

“He’s Andak.” The statement is flat.

“It happens,” answers Jan, smiling softly. “You can choose your friends, not your relatives.”

Something glints in Robin’s eyes, harsh, fierce, and bitter.

“You can’t at that!”

“Please, Robin, don’t judge him by his family’s name. Tom isn’t like that. Surely you must see that people view your tribe as treacherous, and yet you want us to believe and trust you.”

Robin’s smile is reluctant.

“Okay girls, we’ll say you’re right and that Tom’s a good guy. It changes nothing; we’re still in a hideous amount of trouble. No matter what you say or think the Andak will come.”

Jan and I are silent, looking at each other.

“What will happen?”

“I don’t know, but we’d better be ready for them.” Robin sighs and rubs his eyes.

“I’d better gather the council. You girls go back to your quarters, I’ll try to let you know what’s happening later on. Until then it would probably be best if you didn’t mention this conversation to anyone.”

“Wait, Robin!” I bar the door. “What will you tell them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Please don’t tell them about Tom. Please, Robin, you have to keep it a secret!”
“Are you out of your mind? What do you expect me to say? How can I go in before the council and tell them that we are to expect an imminent Andak attack, and when they ask how I know, what am I going to say? That it’s just a feeling I have?”
“But, Robin…”
“Hiding who and what Tom is won’t change the fact that he’s Andak.”
“But…”
“Enough! This conversation is over, Deeta.”
I watch as he leaves the room, slamming the door behind him. An awful sensation lodges deep in my stomach. Jan slides her arm around my waist, trying to give me some comfort. Yet the fear still trembles through me.
What have I done?
Chapter Fifteen

Deeta

The sound is deafening. I’m sitting bolt upright in bed, listening to the sound of its report, before I’m really awake.

“What was that?”

Jan, pyjamas askew and rubbing her eyes, has to shout to be heard above the din. I struggle out from underneath the bed clothes in more haste than is helpful, and trip over the sheet where it trails across the floor. I’m only saved from falling by grabbing Jan, and we tumble in unceremonious alarm from our room into the sitting room. My mother is just entering through her bedroom door. She has hastily wrapped a blanket around her trembling form. With relief I see that my father is close behind her.

“Dad, what’s happening?”

“If it’s what I think…” He breaks off. “I don’t know, but we’d better find out.”

The corridor is full of people; at one end I see Clare and Philip.

“What’s happening?” Clare’s voice catches in her throat, her eyes wide and frightened.

“I was wondering if it would be best for the girls to stay up here, Dad?” Philip asks, but my father shakes his head.

“It might be best to stick together; let’s go downstairs and see what’s going on.”

Dad leads the way down into the hall, and I can see that most of our tribe has assembled already.

It’s obvious that no one knows what is going on. Everyone seems to be talking at once, and the noise is deafening. At first no one notices the guards that enter the hall from the courtyard outside. It’s only when one of the men pushes through the crowd towards Mr. Clark, and taps him on the shoulder, that the room becomes quiet enough for one voice to be heard above the general chaos.

“I have orders that your tribe is to be taken to the west building where they will be given weaponry and instructions.”

“Why do we need weapons, what’s happening?” asks Mr. Clark.

“Didn’t you hear the sirens? We’re under attack!”

“By whom?”

“Someone with dirty great guns, what more do you need to know?” he asks sarcastically. “Now hurry up and get over to the west building!”

The barrel of his gun comes up slightly, and nervously we fall away from him and edge towards the door.

The courtyard is in confusion. The sirens seem much louder in the open air, coupled with the sound of gunshots and explosions. I feel the pressure of the crowd separate me from my parents, and Jan and I are borne first one way, and then the other, by
their frenzied disorder. It’s all we can do to hold on to each other, and stay on our feet.

“Deeta! Deeta!” I see a figure pushing against the crowd and, rather incredibly, making some head way towards us.

“Here, I’m here!” My voice seems tiny against the hubbub, but I see with relief his progress towards us. Robin reaches out, taking a firm hold on my hand, and drags me through the crowd that separates us to his side.

“Come on, this way.”

With grim determination he turns, and pulls us after him towards the south building. We pass through the hallway and out onto the street, not stopping until we rest panting in the shadow of the building that stands opposite the compound.

“Jan, Deeta!”

“Ralph!”

Ralph materialises from the shadows, his face pale and drawn in the dim light. He appears years older.

“Have you seen Nella? I can’t find her anywhere!”

“I don’t know where she is,” I reply.

“I haven’t seen her since dinner,” adds Jan.

“Then she must still be in there.” Even as he speaks he’s moving away from us. I make a grab for his hand, calling his name. He doesn’t seem to hear me.

“Deeta, you have to concentrate.” Robin shakes me, trying to bring my attention away from Ralph’s disappearing figure. “Deeta, listen to me!”

His urgent voice penetrates the fog around my brain, and I turn to him dazedly.

“But, Robin… Ralph…”

“Forget Ralph and listen. Are you listening to me, Deeta?”

I nod my head in affirmation.

“You have to go south if you want to survive.” He lifts his hand, pointing down one of the alleys that branch off the street. “South is that way. You’ll find a building almost completely fallen down; it’s only a story tall and it’s completely covered in ivy. It’s twelve buildings away. You need to find that building and stay there until I come for you, you’ll be safe there until then.”

As his information sinks slowly into my brain one thing becomes starkly and frighteningly clear.

“You’re leaving us?” My voice is not hysterical but oddly flat.

“I have to, Deeta.” He shuffles uncomfortably, but his eyes bore earnestly into mine.

“Kate’s still in there somewhere. I’m sorry, this is the best I can do for you. I’ll meet you at the ruin later.” He turns, and I watch him run across the road and disappear out of sight. Then Jan and I are all alone.

Alone! For a moment I freeze before the harsh reality, but if we are alone we have to look after ourselves, there isn’t anyone else to do it for us.

“Janny, do you remember which way he said we were to go?”

“Down that street there.”

“Then we’d best get going.”

The alley is little more than a corridor between the buildings. It’s very dark, and I can’t see the floor. Our breathing sounds unnaturally loud in the confined space. From what I can tell we seem to be running into the centre of Marshall territory. We break, quite suddenly, into the clearing, and find the building just as Robin described it. Running gratefully into the shelter it affords, for a few moments the only sound is that of our heavy breathing.

“Do you think we should have made sure we weren’t being followed?”
“I couldn’t see anyone,” I answer. “How long do you think Robin will be?”

“Who knows how long it will take to find Catalina in the first place, then they’ll have to get back out of the complex.”

I shiver as she mentions the complex, the memory of the stampeding crowd still too recent and traumatic to be anything but unsettling. Yet even after suppressing the unwelcome memory, I continue to tremble. It takes a while to realise that the chill night air is to blame as it seeps through my thin cotton pyjamas, and I start to giggle.

“What’s wrong?” Jan’s voice, faintly uneasy, floats across the space that separates us.

“I was just thinking how strange we must look, running around in the middle of the night in nothing more than our pyjamas!”

Jan looks startled for a moment, and then smiles, moving to sit across from me. We huddle together in the silence, listening to the sounds of battle in the distance. Is it me or does that dreadful sound seem to be getting nearer?

Time drags on, until finally Jan shifts on the mound of rubble she’s perched on.

“He could have been caught you know,” her tone is conversational.

“Possibly.” I concede, I can’t deny that the thought has occurred to me too.

“How long has it been?”

“I’m not sure, twenty? Maybe thirty minutes?”

“I had it at about that.” Nods Jan.

I’m surprised how calm we are; I guess it’s a testament to how the last few days have changed us.

“What shall we do if he doesn’t come? How long do you think we should wait?” continues Jan.

“Maybe…”

Outside there is the crunch of gravel, and Jan and I flatten ourselves against the wall.

“I – it mightn’t be Robin.” Jan’s voice is soft, and I nod my head in agreement.

The building is littered with rubble. I bend to pick up a brick before creeping to stand at one side of the doorjamb, Jan similarly armed next to me. The steps come closer; soft cautious steps. I feel my heart begin to thud uncomfortably, my shallow breathing amplified by the silence.

The first part of him to enter is his gun. The red laser sight plays across the opposite wall, and all hope and doubt vanish. This is not Robin; it’s one of them. Jan’s fingers tighten on my arm in warning, and I take a firmer grip on the brick.

The second his head is through the door I throw it at his helmet with all my might. The thud of contact as it crashes into his head brings a rush of satisfaction to flood my veins. The figure lurches over with a surprised shout, and Jan makes a grab for his gun. With what seems to be an instinctive reflex, the gun slides back into his hand and he levels it at her. The sight of the red laser light on Jan’s pyjama top freezes us both into immobility.

As we stand so unnaturally still, another helmeted figure walks through the door, and Jan and I are caught in the beam of a torch.

“What the… Nick, put that gun down! Can’t you see they aren’t armed?” The voice is amused.

“That’s what you think. One of the little dears, I haven’t had the chance to find out which one, lobbed the rock of Gibraltar at my head,” Nick growls back.

As he turns, his attention is only half upon us. Jan seizes the opportunity, and takes full advantage of his lack of concentration. She throws the brick she is still holding and the torch shatters, plunging the room back into darkness.

“Run, Janny, run!”
We both head for the door, and as we near it I turn to look over my shoulder for signs of pursuit. I don’t see Jan go down, but as I pass through the door the heavy force to the back of my head causes an explosion of fiery pain. I don’t remember hitting the ground; the darkness claims me first.

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The unspeakable pain that encases my head is so all consuming, that for the first few minutes of consciousness, all I can do is remain completely still where I lay. By and by I manage, with my eyes still closed, to take a rough stock of my surroundings. The surface that I am stretched out on is hard, and there is the faint sensation of motion. Above me I can hear the low murmur of whispered conversation. Then I remember Jan.

My eyes open quickly, too quickly I realise as my eyes react painfully to the light. I turn my head to find, with relief, Jan is laid out beside me. Her dark eyelashes lie peacefully on her cheeks. I close my eyes again, trying to fight the nausea welling up within me that the motion is making worse.

“Looks like one of them is coming round.” The voice is unfamiliar.

“Best thing you can do is turn her lights out for her.” Comes a second, faintly aggrieved and more familiar voice.

I open my eyes again and blink slowly, carefully, a few times to bring the speakers into focus. There is a row of seats to each side of us occupied by soldiers, four to a side. Their visors are up, and they stare down at our hitherto inert forms.

For some moments I stare at them as they are staring at me, before the hazy recollection that I am only wearing pyjamas crawls into my mind. It is immediately followed by the reassuring secondary realisation that we have been further covered by rough woollen blankets.

There is a sudden lurch as movement stops, and the soldiers open the tailgate of what I now perceive is a truck. A moan beside me signals Jan’s struggle toward consciousness.

“Come on, missy, up you get.” One of the soldiers has my arm, and is gently trying to encourage me to rise. “Come on, up you get; you’ll feel better soon.”

For a second I stare at him blankly.

“I’m sorry.”

Turning abruptly I throw up, and I hear rather than see him pull away from me.

“I’m really sorry.”

Again a wave of nausea sweeps over me, and I convulse.

“I’m so sorry!” My voice is unsteady, and my whole form trembling.

“That’s alright, missy, are you going to...” He makes a sketchy gesture.

“No, no; I’m fine now.” I can feel moisture standing icy cold on my brow.

“Come on now, missy.” He wraps the blanket around me more securely, and lifts me into his arms.

“James, lad, get the other one would you?” He calls over his shoulder.

I hadn’t realised that I’d been out of it for so long. The sky is bright, and the sunshine makes my head throb. Closing my eyes against the harshness of the light, the sickness I’m feeling lessens. I hear a door open, and the crunch of gravel cease as he steps into a noisy room. I turn my head into his shoulder away from the glaring lights.

“And to the victor goes the spoil, hey, Simon?”

“Hello, sir, I’m glad to see you safe,” answers my captor.
“Have a bit of a struggle with her did you? I’d have thought…” The amused voice stops suddenly, and when he next speaks his voice is low. “You’d better get her to a bed.”

“Yes, sir, I’m on my way to the ward.”

“No!” His voice is harsh, and he moderates his tone for his next words. “She isn’t as bad as all that; she just needs some quiet. Take her to a holding room.”

“But, sir, she’s had a nasty hit to the back of her head. Shouldn’t a doctor…”

“Take her to the holding room, Simon, and be as quick as you can.” The voice commands authoritatively.

“But there’s another girl…”

“Then take them both!”

I’m only half aware of the conversation taking place, being more concerned by my discomfort than anything else. We begin to move again, and the hubbub gets fainter, until the only sound is that of Simon and James footsteps.

The bed that I am placed on is hard and covered in a plastic that crackles when I move. I lay still listening to the sound of my captor creeping around the room quietly. Soon he comes to stand near the bed again.

“Here, missy, this’ll make you feel better.”

He raises my head and shoulders, and I sip gratefully at the water he is holding to my lips. When I’m finished he lays me gently back down on the bed, and I open my eyes into narrow slits. My helper is a tall man with thick grey hair and soft blue eyes.

“What’s your name?”

“Simon Rush at your service, missy,” he answers promptly. “And what’s yours?”

“Deeta Richards; please could you tell me what you’ve done with my sister?”

“She’s next door sleeping like a baby,” he answers. “So you’re sisters are you? I thought as much. What’s your sister’s name?”

“Jan. Please, sir; is she alright?”

I try to sit up at this juncture, but he pushes me back down.

“Don’t worry, she’s fine. She’ll have a headache like yours when she comes round, but she’ll be ok. The best thing both of you can do is sleep.”

The plastic covering crackles as he stands, but before he can leave I grab his hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Rush, for all your kindness; I’ll not forget it.”
Chapter Sixteen
Deeta

I don’t know how long I sleep, but the pain in my head is significantly lessened. Encouraged, I open my eyes. For a dazed second I just stare at him as he is staring at me from behind the desk on the other side of the room.

For a moment, one wildly elated moment, I had thought it to be Tom. The next second I know I am mistaken. On closer inspection the resemblance is not so strong. Tom’s dark blue eyes are replaced in this man by grey eyes, and though he has the same curling black hair, his cheeks are more gaunt than Tom’s. Then as he stands I see that although he is roughly the same height as Tom, he has less width at the shoulder.

As I scramble up from my position on the bed he walks unhurriedly towards the door, effectively closing off any hope of escape. A sensation of suffocation closes over me. He watches my agitation with a silence that I find horribly chilling.

“Though all should stumble, though many may fall, with you at my side I will always stand tall.” His voice is so like Tom’s that at first I hardly hear what he has said, but the silence impresses the realisation upon me that he expects some sort of answer.

“What?”
“‘Tis the inscription on the locket; a corruption of our family motto.”
My hand flies guiltily to my throat, and I wait in dread for his next words.
“How is Tommy?”
He’s still standing in front of the door, at ease apparently, but watchful. I decide then and there that I’ll not tell him a thing. I swallow convulsively, and edge behind the desk.
“I asked you a question.”
“Tommy who?”
Before I’ve even finished my sentence he’s crossed the room. Dragging me over the desk, his eyes blaze down into mine. Dimly I feel its paraphernalia digging into my back, when he speaks his voice is quiet but filled with anger.
“If your tribe has hurt Tommy in any way, I’ll destroy you all.” My knee connects with his stomach and he groans. His hold on me relaxes a little, but as I pull away from him he drags me back.
Our struggle is furious, and in our writhing we clear the desk and its clutter. Miscellaneous items fall noisily to the floor. I don’t know how long we wrestle, but it can’t be long. My terror and desperation gives me strength, but I know that his brute force will overpower me quickly enough. It’s a surprise when I feel him slip to the floor. I stare up at Jan where she stands over him, a metal table leg in her hand.
“Are you alright, Deet?” Her voice, like her hands, is steady.
“I’m fine, nice hit,” I answer breathlessly.

“Who the he…” He just manages to restrain himself. “Who are you?”

The man on the floor is still holding his head, but he struggles upright as he speaks.

“Who are you?” counters Jan, lifting the table leg and holding it like a cricket bat.

“I hardly think you qualify for a ‘lady’s first’.” His voice is sarcastic, but I see an interested gleam in his eyes as he looks at her that I don’t like.

“Then what about ‘you first or I’ll try and bash your brains out’?”

“I think you’re right; try is about all you’d manage. My name is Ryder Andak; now it’s your turn.”

“I’m Jan Richards, this is my sister Deeta. Perhaps you’d be so kind as to explain what you were doing when I walked in?”

“I want to know what you’ve done with Tommy.”

In vain I try to catch Jan’s eye, but I can do nothing without drawing Ryder Andak’s attention also.

“We haven’t done anything with Tommy; last time we saw him was a few days ago,” replies Jan.

Ryder Andak’s cold eyes move past Jan and connect with mine.

“Perhaps you could explain why she’s never heard of him, then?”

I feel a tell tale blush creeping up my neck, but Jan doesn’t falter.

“Maybe she felt a bit threatened. People become very unreasonable when they’re being throttled, you know.”

“I didn’t touch her until after she’d lied to me.”

“You didn’t? Such forbearance; how did you know she was lying?”

Ryder moves to lean against the desk, a kind of sardonic amusement on his face as he observes our wary step away from him.

“The locket that your sister is wearing; it was a gift from our father to our mother on the day that Tommy was born. After she died it became Tom’s and it meant a great deal to him. What did you do, lift it from him?” His angry, hard voice is again directed at me.

“I didn’t steal it; Tom gave it to me!” My voice is indignant, and under my outraged glare he wavers uncertainly.

“You’d better tell me how you know Tommy.”

“He lives with our tribe.”

“No, lived. He used to live with us.”

Ryder’s eyes rest on me for a moment before returning to Jan.

“I think you’d better tell me from the beginning.”

“Tom arrived at our building when I was about four, and until a few days ago we had no idea he was Andak…”

“What have you done with Dec?” I don’t know why, but until this second I had forgotten that Dec too must be in this place.

“Who’s Dec?”

“The little boy you stole from his home!”

Ryder Andak’s eyes take on a frosty glaze.

“I’d be careful if I were you. I never stole anyone; I reclaimed my nephew from a tribe who had no right to him.”

“No right?”

Anger floods my veins, and I take a step toward the desk.
“Listen to me buster; you might be his uncle, but you haven’t seen him since he was a baby. Now maybe it wasn’t your choice, but it doesn’t change the fact that it was us who looked after him through all that time. We earned the right for him to belong to us through care and love, by looking after him practically every day of his life. We did that; not you.”

For several seconds Ryder Andak stares at me through half closed lids.
“Of course; you must be ‘Aunty Deet’.” His voice is soft, as though the statement is really directed at himself.

“Please tell me, how is Dec?”

“Dec is fine; it might be possible for you to visit him at a later date, but for now continue with your story.”

“Hang on a second; how come you don’t already know all this? You knew I was ‘Aunty Deet’ so how come… ” I break off mid sentence, surprise causing my mouth to drop. “And Dec would have told you that Tom wasn’t held prisoner by our tribe! He won’t talk to you will he?” I can’t help the smug note of victory in my voice.

Ryder’s face registers a flicker of irritation, and he straightens, moving to sit behind the desk.

“We have other things to talk of.”

“Now why won’t he talk to you?” I query.

Ryder Andak’s eyes clash with mine.

“I don’t know.”

“And if he won’t speak to you; who told you Tom was held as a prisoner by our tribe?” asks Jan.

“Someone who’ll wish they’d never lied to me.”

“Keya!” I gasp.

“So you have the felicity of knowing the bitc… harridan too?”

“Why would she tell you that?” Jan’s tone is bemused.

“She did it,” I gasp. “She sold us out, just like Tom said she would. She sold our lives for hers.”

“Now hang on a minute. I don’t like her one bit; she’s self centred, manipulative, and under the very odd impression that she just has to flirt and flaunt her obvious beauty at a man to get anything she wants. However, she was alone, scared, and had no idea what we might do to her. As much as I’d like to strangle her for wasting my time; it’s all too easy to judge someone on something you have no experience of,” cuts in Ryder.

“Well said, but Deeta does have experience in this matter. When you questioned her she blanked you. She didn’t give you Tom’s longitude and latitude,” observes Jan.

Ryder Andak subjects her to a lengthy scrutiny before leaning back in his chair.

“So what do we do now?” asks Jan.

“I don’t know.” Ryder places the tips of his fingers together, and stares into the middle distance. “You could answer a few of my questions.”

I feel my stomach tighten nervously. Tom said that one of his brothers is a killer, and that he has no idea which one is the culprit. Now Ryder Andak, one of those suspected brothers, is sitting in front of us asking us where Tom is. For all I know he could want Tom dead. I feel my cold and clammy hands begin to tremble. What have we told him already that could prove damaging?


The chair falls from my fingers with a spectacularly loud crash, causing Jan and Ryder to turn sharply to where I’m supporting myself against the table.

“Deeta, are you all right?”
Jan is at my side in a moment, her concerned face pale and anxious. For a moment I am ashamed of my pretence, but I can’t help it. I have to talk to her before we communicate anything more to Ryder Andak. Jan helps me to the bed, and forces me to lie down. Past her drawn face I see Ryder Andak; his expression is cynical.

“Please, do you think you could get a doctor or something? She’s so pale… and your thugs were heavy handed. She could have a blood clot or something!”

Jan is very calm usually, but I hear a tinge of hysteria in her voice. Ryder Andak hears it too, and I see some of the scepticism in his eyes fade away.

“I’ll call for the doctor.” He leaves the room swiftly, and I wait for only the barest moment to pass before dragging Jan closer to me.

“Jan we have to talk—”

“So I gather; I never knew you to be of such a theatrical nature before. For a moment there you had me going.”

“You knew?”

Jan rocks back on her heels, looking down at me with a slight frown.

“Well he wasn’t going to trust you, was he? I had to make him think you were telling the truth or we’d never have gotten rid of him. Why did we need to get rid of him, exactly?”

“Because we can’t trust him!”

“You’re telling me!” laughs Jan. “He’s smooth, charming, and incredibly hot: why would I trust him?”

“I don’t… I thought… because you seemed as though you kind of…” I struggle to a disjointed stop.

“Please, Deet; I didn’t come down with the last shower of rain. Why are you so set against him?”

“Because of something Tom told me.”

“I’m listening, Deet; carry on.”

“It was just after Dec, when Tom came back and told us he was an Andak. Before he told everyone else he told me, he explained the reason why he was here. He said when his father died all of his sons became the council for the Andak tribe. Not long after the council was set up some of the brothers met with ‘accidents’. Tom’s eldest brother Dax, who is Dec’s father, came to believe that one of the brothers wanted sole leadership. Whichever brother it is, he’s willing to go to any lengths to achieve his goal. Dax sent Tom and Dec away so that they would be safe, but then he had an ‘accident’ too.”

“Did he die?” asks Jan sharply.

“Yes, but Tom still doesn’t know who the culprit is. Can’t you see; Ryder Andak might want to find Tom just so he can kill him!”

Jan is silent for some time.

“So Ryder Andak could be a cold blooded killer; yet he didn’t seem too pleased when he thought we had done the job for him.”

“And just a moment ago I looked as though I needed a doctor!”

Jan’s face creases into a patronising smile.

“You’re acting isn’t that good; but I take your point. He could be playing us.” Jan purses her lips. “Of course, if he is a deranged psychopath, best not let him think we’re suspicious. We’ll answer his questions…”

“Jan!”

“What? I said we’d answer them; I didn’t say that we should tell him the truth!”
“A very wise plan, but supposing he’s standing just outside the door and listening to every word you say?”
Chapter Seventeen

Deeta

Ryder Andak’s crisply controlled tones leave us both speechless, and we turn to look at him with the frozen panic of rabbits caught in the beam of headlights.

“Now you know rather too much about Tom and our tribe for the things you’ve told me to be untrue. So like good little girls you’re going to answer my questions, but first let me tell you something that might surprise you. I also believe that someone is killing my brothers.”

“Perhaps you even know who?” asks Jan smoothly.

Ryder Andak pulls Jan roughly from her chair and against him.

“Two weeks ago my brother Devin died in one of those accidents you were just discussing. He is the fifth brother I’ve lost, so understand that when you start casting insinuations like that around; I see red. Where is Tom?”

“I don’t know,” answers Jan.

“I’ve asked you nicely, start cooperating or I’ll have to try another method.”

“If you think that threatening us is a good way of showing us your trustworthy, you’re greatly mistaken.” Her voice is sardonic, and she looks up at him from beneath half closed lids.

“You play it cool, I’ll give you that, but you’re in over your head and scared out of your wits. No, don’t bother to deny it. You forget; in this position I can feel every beat of your heart.”

Ryder Andak lurches forwards as Jan kicks him in the shin, but still he retains his hold on her.

“Vicious little vixen aren’t you?” Amazingly his voice holds amusement. “I wish I had more time for your games, they’re excessively diverting, but I’m a busy man.”

Before Jan has time to struggle, he has swept her from her feet, using his leg to trip her up. She falls backwards into the chair, and he handcuffs her to it in an easy fluid movement as she falls.

“Now then; where’s Tom?” he asks, leaning back against the desk.

“You’re like a stuck record,” observes Jan infuriatingly.

“Stop wasting my time!”

“Then try another question; I’m not trying to be difficult, I don’t know where Tom is. He left the Marshall compound two days ago, and we haven’t seen or heard from him since. He took his family with him.”

“His family?” his question is startled.

“Yes; Uncle Jep and the kids.”

“Why didn’t he take you?”

“Why would he?” I counter.

“You’re not his wife?”
“Of course not!” I feel a fiery blush colour my cheeks. “Then who is?” “Tom’s not married,” I reply. “But you just said he took his kids with him.” “Not his kids! Well, they are his kids, but they’re not his kids.” Ryder looks confused. “She means that they’re adopted,” explains Jan. “I see, and do you know why he went?” “Your guess is as good as mine.” Ryder sits on the desk, a thoughtful look on his face. “He’s at his most vulnerable now, I have to find him.” I think he was talking more to himself than us, but suddenly he looks up. “What am I going to do with you?” “Please don’t keep me in suspense,” yawns Jan. Ryder smiles reluctantly. “It depends on you. If you’re good little girls, don’t mention that you know Tom, keep the knowledge that you’re from the tribe that… held… Dec, and manage to keep Keya from giving you away, you can live in private quarters in my house.” For a second there is complete silence, and then Jan, her face white and wrathful, speaks. “You’re fortunate my hands are cuffed to this chair, mate.” “Don’t get excited; I live in the barracks and only ever use the place when Tom’s home.” “Will we be able to see Dec?” I ask. “You’ll have to if you don’t want him giving you away. Look, you’ll be under my care; no one will bother you, I can guarantee that.” “And you won’t be in the same house?” Ryder seems vaguely exasperated by the unimportance of this point. “Listen to me; this is not a good place to be when you’re in the position you’re in, okay? You might not know it, but you need me.” He moves to stand over Jan’s chair. “Are you going to give me any problems? Because you can stay chained to that chair the whole time that you’re here, I don’t care. The only person who’ll be uncomfortable is you.” “Take me somewhere that I can lie down on a bed that doesn’t crackle, and we’ll call it truce,” replies Jan evenly.

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We exit the room, and enter a hallway painted brilliant white with lights set into the ceiling. I’ve never seen lights like that before. We walk for some minutes before entering a large vaulted hall bustling with people. I’d been impressed by the halls at the Marshall compound, but this is a whole new level of opulence. In my wildest dreams, I would never have thought this beauty possible.

The size is far greater than the halls at the Marshall compound, and bears no trace of neglect. Everything is perfect and cared for; even the people who fill the room are completely different from anyone I’ve ever seen before. The men all wear black suits, much the same as Ryder Andak’s. Their hair is neatly parted, and smoothed back tidily. Their shoes have a gloss that would do very well for a mirror. They look pristine, orderly, and… new.

Suddenly I remember that I’m wearing pyjamas.
Once, when they were new, they might have been bright red. Now their colour has faded, and the tartan pattern has become indistinct. They are also rather large, and I use the simple method of tying string around the waist to hold them up, the elasticity in them vanished long before they were ever mine.

“Did you have to bring us through here?” I whisper furiously as I notice the suddenly arrested movements of all those we pass.

“Yes, my car is parked outside,” he answers, surprised.

I am unsure if he really is unaware of the discomfort that we are feeling, or if his ignorance is just a pretence, and underneath he is deriving great enjoyment from our mortification.

“Excuse me, Ryder?”

I turn to find that our progress has been halted by a neat man, a little under average height.

“Hi, Jimmy; what’s up?”

“Val asked me to tell you that he’s having some problems with the…” His voice fades as he takes in me and Jan at somewhat closer range.

“Some friends of mine,” excuses Ryder.

“What? Oh, yes, of course,” answers Jimmy, reddening.

“You were saying?”

“I was? Yes, you’re right, I was! Val asked you to meet him in the depot as soon as you can.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.”

Ryder makes to move on, but with a subservient gesture that is, I think, designed to be ignored if so wished, Jimmy stays his progress again.

“Is there anything you’d like me to do, Ryder?” His voice is quiet. “Would you like anything sent to Wisteria House, or – or any other arrangements to be made?”

“If you could get in touch with Mari and tell her I need a word, and that I’ll be round about one, that would be very helpful, Jimmy,” answers Ryder with a smile. “Thanks.”

We have hardly taken another step before an amused laugh causes Ryder to stop yet again.

“Hello, Rye; are these your pets?”

She is very pale, her slim form draped in a dress of blue and green hues. I’ve never seen fabric like it before; it’s circular and hangs to the floor with a long train at the back. Slit sleeves, caught in at the elbow, fall in magnificent folds to the floor. Through the slits in the fabric her luminous skin is visible.

Her hair is almost white and piled in springy curls on top of her head, framing a beautiful face that is dominated by a pair of large blue eyes, unfairly fringed by dark lashes. Over each eyelid is a thick swathe of colour; green and blue, which sparkles and flashes every time she blinks.

Although I take in all these attributes they are not the first, nor the most obvious thing, I notice about her. That would be the spiteful hate pouring from her eyes, and enveloping us like a poisonous fog.

“Be careful; we might bite, and we haven’t been tested for rabies yet.”

Jan’s voice is sweetly innocent, and I notice a sharp and unbecoming colour spread over the other woman’s cheeks. Ryder mutters a sharp expletive, but I see a trace of amusement in his face.

“I’m a bit busy, Nova, as you can see.”

“Oh, don’t mind me. Are we still good for dinner?” She’s recovered some of her lost composure.
“I’m never too busy for dinner with you, Nova.”
Her smile is dazzling, but as we turn to walk away I have the strangest fancy that her eyes are burning holes into our backs.
“Wow; you’ve got some delightful friends,” remarks Jan.
“She’s very beautiful, isn’t she?”
“Not quite what I meant.”
“But she is beautiful.”
“Like an asp,” smiles Jan, sweetly.
As we near the vast doors of the great hall they slide apart, and Jan and I gasp. I don’t think I’ve ever even imagined anything so beautiful. A grand panorama stretches out before us for further than my eyes can see; a green and thriving oasis in a desolate grey waste land.
To the east tower blocks reach for the sky, but they are nothing like the buildings outside the compound. The grey concrete edifices of utility that characterise the City are nothing like these beautiful cream towers with columns and rococo work.
To the west is an estate of large houses, built with the same attention to beauty, surrounded by their own patch of well kept lawn and garden. Straight in front of us I see the majestic grace of a wooded park, with lakes and lawns. Toward the very centre of the compound, a huge pavilion in marble stands on a plinth perhaps fifteen or twenty feet off the ground.
“It’s breathtaking, isn’t it?” Ryder’s tone is reverent and soft.
With some effort I tear my eyes from the splendour, and turn to him.
“How…” Words fail me, and I stand wide eyed and speechless.
“It’s the same for everyone the first time they see it; the wonder and rapture that radiates from them, it’s always there. I’ve never had that. I’ll never experience the same awestruck feeling.” His voice is regretful. “I was born here, I knew nothing else until I was thirteen and left the walls of this compound for the first time. To my own shame I have to admit that this is usual, this is what I’m used to.”
We follow him down steps that end in a pavement of hand set stone flags.
“Where is that car?” mutters Ryder impatiently.
“Yes, is a…”
“Yes, I know what a car is, thank you,” answers Jan tartly.
Ryder smiles, and turns to look down the road. It’s strange: he’s strange. When we had stepped out into the beauty of the compound, he had been looking forward to our reaction. He had taken pleasure in our pleasure and delight; he’d been proud of this place and its magnificence.
“Here it comes.”
The car glides to a smooth stop beside us, and the doors open. Ryder Andak slides in, and I bend to take a look at the interior.
“I thought that cars needed drivers? There isn’t a steering wheel!”
“These cars were developed here in our own research centre; they’re electric and follow wires embedded in the road.” Ryder presses a button, and a screen slides out of the dashboard and flashes into life. “Instead of a steering wheel they are equipped with these touch screens. You select your destination, and it takes you there and drops you off. You press this button here on your key card which tells it to go to the nearest car park with a vacancy. It finds a vacancy using its link to the grid. The car then reserves the space, taking it off the available list on the computer memory. This button here on the key card calls it back to you, and the card itself is a beacon containing a chip which tells the car where you are.”
“You mean there’s no way for you to control the thing manually?”
“There isn’t any need; they’re perfectly safe, we’ve never had an incident.”
“Well I’d prefer not to be the first to have an incident, if you don’t mind.”
“Would you just get in?”
“Don’t you think it would be better to walk?” asks Jan mistrustfully.
“No, I don’t.”
With the air of a martyr Jan climbs into the car, and slides across the front seat to make room for me. Even though Ryder is both broad and tall, there’s still plenty of room for us all.
“A few of the scrapers to the west are apartments; most people prefer to live in the city as opposed to out here on the estate. Only members of the council can have both an apartment and a house on the estate.”
“Yet you choose to live in the barracks; why?” asks Jan.
“I’m unmarried; what would I want with a house or an apartment? Besides; I spend most of my time in the council building, and that’s where the barracks are located. It’s much easier and more convenient to lodge there.”
“But still you keep the house?”
“And the apartment; one day I’ll need both.”
“Have you ever lived there?” I ask.
Ryder is silent for so long that at first I think he will not answer.
“Only for the first four years of my life; then my father remarried, and we moved to the apartment in the city. Generally when he remarried he left his children by that wife with their mother. Unfortunately for him our mother was dead, and there were no other relatives. His new wife, Minda, took us in. She’s kind like that; he’d have left us to rot.”
There is outstanding bitterness in his voice.
The car comes to a standstill outside a three storied house with a veranda. The doors open, and I step out on to the path. A small neat hedge surrounds the immaculate garden, and wisteria climbs across the porch and up the front of the house to hang in long purple racemes. Ryder catches my eye as I stare at its elegant splendour.
“Yeah, I know; I really ought to have it cut back.”
“That would be a pity.”
“That’s what my mother always said… not that I remember; it’s only what I’ve been told.”
He leads the way up the path towards the front door, and into a hall dominated by a large staircase.
“The kitchen is through the door straight ahead, the lounge is off right with French doors leading on to the garden. To the left there’s the dining room, and the pool.”
He’s climbing the stairs as he imparts this information, and we arrive on the landing.
“There are two bedrooms on this floor, both with their own bathroom, dressing room, and sitting room. On the top floor there’s a further four bedrooms.”
He opens one of the two doors.
“This will be your room, Jan.”
Jan passes through into the cream room, taking in the four poster bed with burgundy and cream hangings, the dressing table and stool, the chaise lounge, and the entire wall devoted to a built in wardrobe. Her eyes are wide, and Ryder watches her with a strange look on his face. Then his gaze clashes uncomfortably with mine, and his features take on a closed look. For a second I am horribly shaken; Tom often receded from me like that. I never knew it was an unfriendly gesture before.
Your room is this way, Deeta.” He walks out of Jan’s room, and across the hall to the second door.

The room is light and spacious; the walls a delicate blue, and the ceiling a warm yellowy cream. There is a settee, a bed, and a small table, but other than that the room is clutter free. I move forwards to finger the blue drapes on the large four poster bed, and notice the oil paintings on the wall. Bold and dramatic; they depict an array of seascapes and sail boats.

“Do you like it?”

Ryder Andak is watching me closely, but in an entirely different way to the way he looked at Jan.

“Yes; it’s lovely.”

Despite the fact that I do think it is a nice room, something about it is… different, strange to me.

“It’s Tommy’s room, when he’s here.”

Ryder stands quietly, waiting for my reaction.

“Tom’s room?”

Suddenly I realise what had been bugging me; despite the four poster, this room is obviously a man’s room. With Ryder’s watchful eyes upon me, I fidget nervously. He reaches out, and grabs my arm.

“I try to be as honest with people as I can, so I’ll tell you that I don’t trust you and I don’t like you very much. I’m not sure what your game is, but something about you just doesn’t add up.” He shakes his head. “You’re just a little too good to be true; a little too naïve. Oh, you play it well, but I’ve been around long enough not to believe you.”

“You treat people you don’t like very much in a very bizarre way; inviting them to live in your house.”

“Make no mistake; the only reason you’re here is because of your sister. While I don’t believe you, I do believe her.” Ryder releases my arm. “I’ll send Mari over tomorrow to find you and your sister something to wear. I’d get some sleep if I were you.”

He turns and walks away, and a few moments later I hear the front door close behind him. I make my way back to Jan’s room, and find her standing at the window watching Ryder Andak leave.

“Well, what do you think? Is he trustworthy?”

“That man is trouble,” I reply.

“You’re telling me!” Jan turns. “Seriously, what do you think?”

I sink down on the edge of the bed, wrapping my arm around the post, and lay my cheek against the softness of the drapes.

“I’m scared, Jan; he scares me. Every now and then he reminds me so much of Tom, it makes me want to trust him but…”

“I know what you mean. I noticed it too, every now and then.” There is a strange inflection in her voice, and she comes to sit beside me on the bed. We both remain in miserable silence for some time. I’m trying not to cry, and Jan is cradling her head in her hands.

What are we supposed to do now?

What was happening at the Marshall compound? Was the fight still on, or had the Andak won already? I swallow jerkily, wondering where my parents are, if they’re safe. Are they even alive?

A shudder tears through me, and I push the thought aside. I can’t, I won’t, believe they’re gone! They had to be safe. So did Clare and Philip, Ralph and Nella? A niggle
at the back of my mind makes me think of Tom. Are Tom, Uncle Jep, and the children safe?

A horrible, empty sensation sits in the pit of my stomach, teasing me with the possibility that I may have lost everyone but Jan.

“What do we do? How can we find out if we can trust him? There doesn’t seem to be any way of making sure.” Jan raises her hand, her fingers making a gentle exploration of the back of her head and neck. “My head’s fit to split; am I bruised?”

Beneath her hair and down her neck I can see a purple and blue stain spreading over her pale skin.

“Yes, it seems to be something that the Andak are good at.”

My voice is a shade bitter as I remember the pain I suffered with my face and arm. The marks have almost faded, but my arm is still sore. It reminds me belatedly what the Andak are capable of.

“I have an idea, Jan.” I stand and pace the length of the room twice. “We have to find out if we can trust Ryder Andak or not, and we need to stop Dec giving Tom away. Plus we have Keya to deal with; we need to get her to keep her mouth shut…”

“Manage that and you’re some kind of magician,” retorts Jan.

“I think that we could do it.”

“How? Did you remember the crystal ball?”

“Jan, stop it! All we have to do is twist the facts a little… right?”

A slow smile spreads across Jan’s face.

“Right.”

“If we can trust him, then maybe…” I break off, taking her hand in mine. “Maybe we can find out what happened to everyone.”

Jan’s eyes fill with tears, and she shakes her head.

“I’m not sure I want to know. You saw what the Andak did, Deet. What if they… what if they’re all dead?”

Her question hangs on the air; there isn’t anyone to answer her.
Chapter Eighteen

Deeta

I don’t know how much later it is that we finally finish our plans. Strangely enough we didn’t even discuss the possibility of escape. We both knew we’d never make it past the great hall, and we couldn’t desert Dec. In any case; all the avenues of this mystery seem to lead here, so maybe here we’ll find the answers that have proven so elusive.

It’s strange to leave Jan and go to my own room. I’ve always shared a bedroom with at least one of my sisters; the idea of being alone is unsettling. I remember to go down stairs and lock the door, but find I needn’t have bothered. Ryder Andak has already locked us in.

As I step into the now dark bedroom, the curtains around the bed billow out towards me. I realise there must be a window open. I close it and the curtains before turning on the light, and then set off to explore the bathroom.

The only word I can think of that in anyway comes near to describing it, is opulent. In one corner there is a huge tiled shower. In the other, extending out into the bay window, is a walk in bath. Every surface is highly polished marble.

“Deeta!” Jan’s voice calls out, and we almost collide in the door way. “Did you ever see anything like it?”

“It’s pretty impressive,” I admit.

“Impressive? I could spend my entire life in that bath!”

“Well I’m not sure about that, but I fully intend to spend an hour or so in there.”

“Talking of which I’d better get back; I left the taps going. Hot water comes out of the tap, Deet, as hot is if it came from a kettle! G’night!”

She begins to whistle as she closes the door behind her, and I smile at her renewed positivity. It amazing how much better we feel now that we have a plan; it’s as though a weight has been lifted from our shoulders.

Despite the fact that having a purpose has given us a measure of calm, both of us are strangely nervous of all the civilisation around us. Like some ancient tribe on discovering fire; we’re intrigued and fearful at the same time, half believing it’s all some form of witchcraft.

I shake my head over the whole situation, trying to push everything but the night’s rest before me out of my mind.

I feel a moment’s hesitation when I begin to fill the bath; all my life I have lived with water restrictions. Three inches of water was the absolute maximum for a bath in the Clark tribe. We had to heat every drop up in a kettle over the fire, so we were always secretly relieved to have an excuse to stop. With the realisation that it is Andak resources that I’d be wasting comes a flagrant disregard for economy. I fill the huge bath to within four inches of the top.
In the end I don’t think that I spend much more than fifteen minutes immersed in the hot water. After washing my hair and lying back, I find the battered feeling of stiffness ease away leaving me tired and limp. I begin to long for the cool sheets and comfort of bed.

There’s a toothbrush in the stand by the sink; blue with a white stripe. I hesitate knowing it must be Tom’s. After carefully searching the cupboard above the sink and not finding another, I decide that he won’t mind the imposition of me borrowing it.

Wrapped in a towel as big as a double sheet, which somewhat impedes my progress, I find myself standing in front of the wardrobe. Taking a deep breath I reach out and open the door. As I expected it’s filled with Tom’s neatly folded clothes, and I hastily grab a shirt and close the door with a bang.

I feel as though I have somehow invaded Tom’s privacy. The thought strikes me as silly because I have washed, ironed, and put Tom’s clothes away for years at home. Yet this is different. This is something that he has shut me out of. He’s never spoken of this place, and I feel as though I’m being pushed into his life here. I feel nosey somehow; that I’m encroaching on his personal business.

You do understand, don’t you? I’m worried that I’m not explaining myself properly.

“Sorry, Tom, but my need is greater than yours at the minute,” I whisper softly to myself.

The sheets of the bed are smooth and cool as I slide between them, and I pull the covers around me. Oddly I feel surrounded by the sensation of safety I always feel in Tom’s presence. It’s as though here in this room Tom has left something of himself, something familiar, strong, and reassuring. I badly need that reassurance in this place filled with strange people who I’m too scared to trust.

It’s surprisingly easy to drift off to sleep.

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“Deeta!”

The hoarse whisper is so close to my ear that I feel my curls stirred by her breath. I open my eyes groggily, propping myself up on my elbow.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

Jan’s hair tumbles in riotous disorder over the shoulders of the over large shirt she is wearing.

“There’s someone downstairs!”

“What!” Immediately I’m upright in bed. “Is it Ryder?”

“No, Ryder.”

I slide out of the sheets, and creep over to the door with Jan close behind me. From downstairs we hear an intermittent clattering, interspersed by long periods of quiet.

“Janny, pass me that vase.”

She picks up the heavy glass ornament and passes it to me. I feel slightly braver with it in my hand, and slowly we begin to descend the stairs. By the time we have reached the bottom step I’ve ascertained the direction that the noise is coming from.

The beautifully dressed woman pauses in her task and looks up at us, an easy and welcoming smile on her face.

“Oh, hello! I thought you would sleep longer than that; I was just making you breakfast in bed.” Her voice is soft and friendly. “I’m afraid you’ll have to help me
out, Rye’s such a cad; he told me that the blond one was Deeta. Now I see why he was grinning; it doesn’t help me much does it?”

“I’m Deeta. This is Jan, my sister.”

“Well it’s very nice to meet you both.”

She smiles again, and I notice that she isn’t as young as I’d taken her for at first. I would place her somewhere in her mid forties.

“Perhaps you’d like me to take that vase, it looks heavy?”

“What? Oh, yes… sorry. Only I thought…”

“Don’t worry, dear; it’s quite plain what you thought. If you don’t mind me saying so, it shows a distinct presence of mind. My name’s Mari.”

“You’re Dec’s mother!”

I could bite my tongue the second the words are out of my mouth. Have I given away something we are supposed to be hiding? Her smile vanishes, and sadness envelops her.

“It’s okay, dear,” she assures me, seeing my consternation. ‘Rye told me everything.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t…”

“Don’t worry.” She turns from us, and walks back towards the pots on the cooker.

“If you sit down I’ll pour you some coffee; your breakfast should be ready in just a moment. I was going to suggest we dine alfresco, but I don’t think that the hedges are quite high enough.”

Her smile is pointed, and looking down I remember the shirt that falls half way between my thigh and knee. Jan and I exchange embarrassed glances, and try vainly to pull them further down our legs.

Mari places our breakfast before us, and sits down in one of the vacant chairs with a cup of coffee. She’s discarded her apron, revealing a cream dress fitted to the waist and flaring out to the floor. Around the hem there is a thick band of embroidery in red, orange, and yellow hues.

“So… Ryder has asked me to take you under my wing.” She smiles at our startled faces.

“You make it sound as though we need protection,” responds Jan.

“That’s because you do. The second you came here you became fair game to any single man. If your captor doesn’t claim you, then any other unattached man can. Ryder brought you here putting you under his protection; no man will try for you all the while you remain within that safety.”

“I see. Isn’t it a bit greedy; to lay claim to two women at once?” asks Jan drily.

“Very greedy, especially when the two girls in question are as beautiful as you two are. However, Ryder’s a blood Andak, so he can do what he likes. Besides, the men respect him too much to question his activities.”

“You mean that the girls that are captured are… well… kinda… shared out?” I ask.

“What a barbaric idea!” laughs Mari. “I’m saying that in our tribe men outnumber women seven to one, so they get kind of excited when new blood is brought in from outside. They’ll court and impress you just the same as any other man would; in fact they try harder to be a gentleman, knowing as they do that the girl will have the pick of the bunch.”

“That’s novel, in our tribe it was the other way round; more women than men.”

“Just as unsuitable,” declares Mari.

“Why is there such a big difference in the numbers?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s because of the army. The army was started before the crash and made up of men.”
“But the crash was thirty years ago!”
“Yes, I know. My esteemed father-in-law, Paul Andak, rounded up all the male orphans he needed in the years after the crash, and put them into training for the army. I think that it was the one and only time that he didn’t provide for all the angles. Or maybe he just didn’t care about the difficulty there would be in the future.”

It’s strange to hear Tom’s sentiments echoed by this stranger.
“Now your trouble is going to come from a different place; the women of the tribe. To be more precise; the young, unmarried women.”
“What do you mean?” There is a hint of trepidation in my voice.
“You’ve walked slap bang into a political hot bed of intrigue and string pulling.”
“Why?”
“Because every woman in this tribe is raised with a certain goal; to marry a blood Andak. They are willing to go to lengths as astonishing as they are absurd to achieve that goal. Their antics are getting more desperate because there are only six brothers left available, and it will be a few years before the next generation are old enough to chase. Two of those brothers look as though they’ve already chosen, three look as though they’ll stay bachelors forever, and the last one is never around long enough to make any impact on. Now Ryder has selected two girls and placed them in my care. To an outsider it looks as though he’s going to settle with one of you, making you two public enemy number one. Plus…”
“There’s more?”
“Well… it’s Nova. She looks on Ryder as her own personal property, and she will not take being jilted again well.”

My mind goes back to the great hall and the beautiful girl who had drooled all over Ryder. Hadn’t he called her Nova? I’m sure he had, it’s such an unusual name I can’t be mistaken.
“Nova was jilted; by whom?” I can’t help the amused, slightly catty interest I feel, even though I’m rather ashamed of it.

“Nova is the daughter of a French diplomat and a film star; in here that makes her royalty — of a kind. But there are a lot of people who are from that kind of royalty in here, I should know. My father was a famous singer and my mother a model. Both of them paid for the privilege of retreating into the safety of this compound when the crash happened. But we’re straying from the point; a few years ago Nova and Val had a thing going—”


“He’s one of Paul Andak’s children; wife number four’s eldest son. Anyway, one of the guards brought home a girl from a skirmish called Charlotte Brennan, and within six months she and Val were engaged. Needless to say Nova was livid. There hadn’t been an understanding between her and Val, but she had taken it for granted that she would be Mrs. Val Andak sometime in the near future.”

“What happened?”

I never thought that hearing the life stories of people I’ve never even heard of before could be so interesting.

“Nova threw a hissy fit. Seriously, she freaked out and turned into some sort of banshee. She made Charlotte’s life miserable. Don’t get me wrong, Val shielded her all he could, but he couldn’t be there for everything, and Nova was relentless. In the end Charlotte couldn’t take it, and she broke off the engagement.” Mari hesitates. “It changed Val, it made him… well, you’ll see soon enough.”

Mari looks sheepish suddenly, as though she only just realises that she has disclosed a lot of personal information to two people she doesn’t even know. In the
uncomfortable silence that follows she smooths her hand over her elaborate chignon. It draws my attention to her beautiful black hair.

“You see now why you need protection?” she asks at length. "Ryder has put you in an awkward position where everyone will assume…” Her voice trails off suggestively. “You’ll have all the trouble of being courted by an Andak, with none of the advantages. Don’t blame Rye too much: his hand was forced.”

We sit in silence while we finish breakfast, and then Mari speaks again.

“After you’ve dressed we have a lot to do; I’ll take you into town.”


“To have you fitted for some clothes, of course. You don’t want to meet up with Nova without some kind of Dutch courage.”

“I thought Dutch courage came out of a bottle?” asks Jan, her eyebrows raised.

“I thought this kind might be safer, we do want you to be able to stand upright, after all.”

“Will there be a lot of people in town?” My voice is hesitant as I remember the thriving mass of people in the great hall that we’d passed through. I’d never seen so many people all in one place before; the idea of being in a crowd that big again makes me feel nauseous.

“Yes. Oh, I see! Rye told me you were a little short on clothes, so I stopped off in town yesterday after he left me and ordered you some dresses for this morning; they’re in the sitting room.”

At first I just stare at her, wondering what she’s talking about. Then I realise that she thinks that I’m reluctant to be seen in public in my tattered old pyjamas. I shake my head. As if, at a moment like this, I could care anything for what I’m wearing! It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her that there are plenty of clothes in the wardrobes upstairs, but I bite my lip.

Mari has been kind to us; I don’t want to hurt her feelings. Also she’s Dec’s mother, and if she takes a dislike to me, I might never see him again.

It’s the first time I’ve entered the sitting room, and I find it’s a very large and airy. At one end French doors lead on to a patio, and around the ceiling there is elaborate coving picked out in gold leaf. The hangings are cream and yellow with a thin gold stripe, and cream sofas with fluffy feather cushions flank a huge marble fire place. Strewn across these sofas are several boxes of various shapes and sizes.

“If we carry them upstairs you can try them on and see if they fit.”

“What about the kitchen, shouldn’t we tidy…” I begin.

“No don’t worry about that; Nan will see to it,” assures Mari breezily.

“Who’s Nan?”

“The maid, of course.” Mari pushes open the door of the bedroom I slept in last night, and spreads the parcels on the bed. With an almost child like zeal she begins opening them, starting with the two biggest boxes. From the first she pulls a powder pink dress in chiffon with a scooped neck and fitted bodice.

“This one’s for you, Jan, and this one is yours, Deeta.”

With a flourish she pulls the turquoise dress from its cocoon of tissue paper. It’s fitted to the thigh and flairs out to the floor with a train at the back. I notice that the neck is high but the back dips low, with an extra fold of material that falls in a cowl effect. It’s very beautiful and, despite my earlier thoughts, I can’t help reaching out to touch it. I can hardly bare the idea of ruining something so lovely by wearing it; somehow it just doesn’t seem right.

Mari pushes me into the bathroom to change and I stand in the middle of the room, cradling the dress in my arms, wondering what to do. It’s of a beautiful quality and I
notice that at some point it has been altered, making it a lot smaller at the waist. The thought that it must be a hand-me-down makes me feel better, and I pull it on and wrestle with the zip. A light tap on the door and Mari’s muffled voice comes from the other side.

“Do you need some help with the fastener?”

I step out into the bedroom with a word of thanks, and Mari zips me up. I’m rather surprised to find that the fit is perfect. Jan walks in from the other room, the circular skirt of her dress hiked up over one arm. From her face I can tell that she’s lamenting just how uncomfortable these clothes are.

“They fit beautifully.”

Mari admires us from all angles, giving the fabric a shake here and a smooth there.

“How did you know our sizes?” asks Jan. There is something in her voice; intrigue mixed with amusement.

“Rye told me,” answers Mari.

“How did he know?” I cross my arms over my chest in embarrassment.

“He has a good eye,” she laughs. “I’ve never known him to be wrong.”

“A man of many talents.” Jan’s voice is dry, but I detect something else hidden within its timber.

Admiration?

Exasperation?

Derision?

Maybe a little of all; it’s as though against her will she is strangely impressed.

“Yes…I suppose so.”

Mari is hesitant. I don’t think she knows quite how to take Jan; she’s unsure of her, maybe even a little wary. She looks from one to the other of us for a moment, and then clears her throat.

“Yes… well… anyway, we have to get moving; the car is outside.

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I’m not sure what I had expected, but travelling in the car I try to work out everything in my mind.

It’s all so strange, like a dream. Then again maybe nightmare would be a more accurate description. Yesterday morning I had been queuing in the Marshall compound for my rations, meeting Catalina, and trying to sort out the whole muddled mystery of Tom’s disappearance.

For a second my mind freezes, cold and deadened. I have to force myself to think, to move my thoughts onward away from the hurt, but when finally they do shift I wish that they hadn’t.

I can’t believe the pain. It isn’t like the pain you read about in books; it isn’t a fiery ache that threatens to burn me up. It’s different, numbing, creeping coldly over me and leaving me dazed. I feel empty and hopeless, depressed and so, so sad. It’s a grief that cannot be expressed.

I think of my father, of how much I wish he was here now to give me guidance and to tell me what to do. I wish I had him to confide in. I wish that I could tell him the things that plague me, the worries, doubts, and fears. Jan and I talk about all that’s happening, but we are both as lost as each other. Like that scripture in the Bible about blind guides. That’s how this feels; as though we’re both guiding each other through a maze of only half realised intrigue. With both of us in the dark, how can we navigate the hidden pitfalls?
Dad would tell me, he would explain and show me the things to do. He would leave nothing hidden, but would tell me all that was in his heart. He would be completely open with me.

Strange, I used to think that Tom was open with me. It’s only now that I see the truth; that it was me who was open with him, and that Tom always held most of himself in reserve from me.

I don’t know how this is happening; how can I be so far away from the people I love most? I don’t even know what has happened to them. Why is it that, even now, when I know why Tom did what he did and can attribute the noblest motives to his actions, why does it still hurt so much? Why is it that, when I know how hard it must have been for him all these years, I still have only one truly overriding emotion? A twisted, irrational and, in the grand scheme of things, totally unimportant and selfish thought.

How could he leave us?
Why could he leave us?

I don’t doubt that he is right in what he is doing; Tom always does the right thing. I just don’t understand why it was possible for him to walk away. Why wasn’t it just too much to ask of him? I feel my throat tighten, choking me, because I know the answer; I’ve known it all along. It’s because Tom is strong; physically, mentally, and emotionally tough. If something is right then he’ll do it, even if it’s hard or if it means that in some way he’ll lose out. He’ll do it, and what’s more he’ll do it with alacrity; he won’t wait around hoping the problem will just go away.

On the one hand I’m immeasurably proud of him. On the other I can’t help a tiny, half smothered, wish that he was a little weaker. It is an unworthy feeling that I’m ashamed of.
Where are you all?
What are you doing?
Are you safe?
The questions are left unspoken; there is no one to answer them.
Chapter Nineteen

Deeta

I don’t understand Mari.
I don’t understand anything about this place, but Mari’s behaviour today has proved particularly confusing.

My tribe has been wiped out. I have no idea what has happened to my family and whether or not they are safe. I’ve been kidnapped and brought to a strange place, filled with weird people, who behave oddly. Yet for some bizarre reason, Mari thinks that the most important thing to do, and the best way to spend our time, is to shop. She dragged us first to a dress makers, where she purchased a great many highly impractical dresses for us. Then on to a shoe maker, where she presented us both with several pairs of shoes that, although pretty, are of very little use. Then she took us to something that I remember hearing my mother talk about: a hairdresser.

I think that she was trying to be kind; she seems to think that we should view this excursion as some amazing treat. I can tell she’s puzzled by our lack of enthusiasm. I guess she doesn’t know that we have witnessed the elegance and relaxed atmosphere of complete luxury in the Andak compound with confusion and horror. Everything is so jarringly disparate from the world that we know exists just outside the walls of this compound.

So now I sit in my new dress, with my hair arranged with the utmost care into perfect curls that have been gathered on the crown of my head to fall softly down on one side. The make-up that has been applied to my face somehow manages to make my eyes look huge. I feel different, like a doll, a toy brought in from the outside to be played with.

It’s as though Mari is trying to make over the savages from the outside world, forming us into the more acceptable Andak image. If that was her purpose then she has succeeded; I do look like one of them, like an Andak. Somehow my own identity has be swallowed up and redefined so that I fit in better with the aesthetics of this place.

In a way I am relieved, because I will be meeting these people in their own guise. These clothes and the polish, they are a veneer, a type of armour to hide behind and take confidence from. The trick will be in keeping them as just that, and not being taken over completely.

“I’m afraid that from now on I can’t help you very much. I can try, but I don’t guarantee that I’ll be of much use.”

We’re in Jan’s room, the boxes of our recent purchases scattered everywhere. We relax gratefully on the sofa, sinking into the feather cushions, and drink tea that Nan brought up for us, along with the daintiest sandwiches I have ever seen.
“Why, what’s next?” I ask, selecting another bite sized morsel and popping it into my mouth.

“Next is lunch,” replies Mari.

“Oh, no! Not that!” cries Jan dramatically.

Mari laughs.

“Actually, to be more precise, it’s a barbeque. We have a barbeque lunch every Wednesday in the Italianate pleasure garden; tomorrow you will attend.”

“Why?” My voice is startled.

“You girls will have to meet everyone at some point, so tomorrow you’ll have lunch with us and tomorrow night you’ll have dinner with us at the dining room.”

“Why does the ‘dining room’ sound creepy?”

“You saw the park in the middle of the complex?”

“It was kind of hard to miss.”

“Well, the pavilion in the middle is known as the dining room. It’s the tradition of the tribe that the blood Andaks have dinner as a family there along with their friends. Some families have an open invitation, you know, families with unmarried daughters. Pretty, unmarried daughters, who because of that invitation think it their right and their right alone to be included. They will not look on your interloping with friendliness.”

“Then why go?” I ask.

Mari looks uncomfortable, and for some moments she doesn’t speak.

“Ryder has his reasons for the way he does things; I just don’t know what they are. Your presence here is not a secret, Ryder occupies one of sixteen seats on the board and he can do nothing without the board’s consent. To gain that consent he must put his trust in them all. How can he do that when he knows that one of them is a traitor?”

We must look surprised because she smiles sadly.

“Of course I know; do you really think I would have given up my son to strangers for any other reason than knowing him to be in danger? It was bad enough worrying about Dax; I could hardly bear that.”

Her voice is roughened with emotion as she mentions her husband’s name, and a single tear traces a lonely path down her otherwise controlled face. I find myself wondering at her strength, wondering if, in the same position, I could be similarly selfless. If it were better for Dec that he live here, could I let him go?

Outside darkness has begun to settle. Soon we will don the beautiful silken creations that are even now hanging in our dressing rooms, and go to the pavilion in the middle of the pleasure gardens. There, if Mari is to be believed, the only thing that awaits us are snide comments and unpleasant insinuations of most of the people we meet.

Suddenly in my mind’s eye I see the girl from the grand hall; her flawless beauty, her perfection of movement. Mostly I remember the hatred and spite spilling out of her beautiful eyes. I look down at my dress, the beautiful dress that Mari bought this morning, feeling that it is too fine. Against that girl in the grand hall I will look ridiculous; tricked out in all the finery, but missing the sophistication and elegance. Next to her all will see I don’t belong.

Unbidden a feeling of loneliness engulfs me, and I long for something more familiar, something safe and comforting. I long for my father… or maybe Tom.

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“Have you ever been sailing, Deeta?”
Mari’s daughter Tina has directed several polite and unthreatening questions of inanity towards me, but this last question takes the cake.

“No, I haven’t.”

“We have sailing dinghies on the big lake; if you like I’ll take you out on the water. Don’t worry; I won’t drown you!”

I laugh along with her, easily but superficially, and secretly heave a sigh of relief.

Tina, Jennet, Fay, and Jojo, Mari’s daughters, seem friendly enough. Yet ever since we left Wisteria House the conversation has been strained and uncomfortable. It isn’t that we have a mutual dislike of each other or anything; we just can’t seem to find a common ground.

They have little idea what our lives are like, and what we see of their lives fills us with a kind of disgust. I can’t really explain it, because it isn’t that I dislike these girls. They seem to be very nice, but it is as though they have blinkers on. They, like everyone else that lives in Andak city, seem to have lost touch with reality. I guess it’s because my reality isn’t the same as theirs.

I mean; what is Tina thinking of, asking me if I’ve ever been sailing? Ask me if I’ve ever had to fight for my life, for survival. Yet my life is to some as theirs is to me. I might not live in the luxury of this place, but I am fully aware of how fortunate I am. I have my family and my tribe who have protected me and safeguarded me. For others it has not been like that. To some the struggle of life has been an all consuming adversary that has taken everything from them, including their lives. Why can’t these people see the suffering just outside their walls? Don’t they care?

Are other people’s lives so unimportant to them? It’s as though they don’t think about it. It doesn’t seem to have registered to them that out there, in the City, there are people dying because they have no food or clean water, things that the Andak take for granted.

“Besides you’ll probably want an excuse to get away after a while,” observes Tina morosely.

“What? Why?”

“Because Nova will be there.”

Fay’s voice is depressed, and I notice a faint droop to her shoulders.

Nova, Nova, Nova!

Who cares about Nova and her petty ways? More important things are at stake! Their father is dead, and his killer is even now systematically killing their uncles. How can Nova’s sniping have the power to hurt them after having endured the pain of losing a loved one? I have an urge to shake them both senseless.

“That’s good, at least we won’t be short of someone to laugh at,” drawls Jan lazily.

I see Fay, Tina, and Jennet cast shocked glances her way, and smile.

“Why does Jan think Nova’s funny, Deeta?”

Jojo, Mari’s youngest daughter, slips her hand into mine as she skips along beside me.

“Because Nova’s so silly,” I reply.

“She isn’t very nice,” Jojo observes at length.

“Well, let’s just say Nova doesn’t always do the nicest things,” I temporise.

After all; what do I really know about Nova anyway? She might have had a horrible life; who am I to judge her actions and motives? I look down at Jojo’s slight form as she hops from one foot to the other, a sudden disquieting thought forming in my mind.

“Jojo, how old are you?”
She smiles up at me, a familiar cheeky glint in her laughing eyes. She looks so much
like Dec; sweet and yet deeply mischievous.
“I’m as old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth!”
“How old, Jojo?”
“Eight and a half,” she answers proudly.
Her fingers slip through mine, and she runs a little way ahead.
Eight and a half.
The awful significance of her words is not lost on me.
“Dax never even knew about her.”
Mari’s voice startles me, and I turn to find her eyes on the excited figure of her
youngest child.
What should I say?

I know that there is no way to alleviate the pain that she must feel, that my words
could not help her. I never knew Dax; had never even heard of him until a few short
days ago. Yet all that I do know of him, all that I have been told, fills me with sadness
that such a good man should have lost his life in such a way.
“I didn’t know until two months after he had gone.” Mari shivers, wrapping her
scarf around herself a little tighter. “All I could think of was that he would never
know. It helped to have her to look forward to; to have ever more proof of Dax, and of
our life together.”
“How do you do it, Mari?” My voice is roughened with tears. “How can you stand
it; knowing that the man you loved has gone, and the person who took him from you
is right here and still killing?”

Mari looks at me, her delicate features sad and wistful.
“Because I have to,” she answers simply. “When I’m feeling bad I think that I could
have had none of this pain, but I wouldn’t have had Dax either. I wouldn’t have our
children and the memories of our life together. No matter what, through all that’s
happened, it was worth the pain.”

The path we are walking along opens up onto a flagged courtyard. Small tables
cover the stone surface, and down the length of one side there is a long table groaning
under the weight of our lunch.

Mari squeezes my hand and smiles, directing my attention to one of the statues that
are dotted around the garden. I know she’s trying to divert my mind from the sadness
we’ve just been discussing.

Many people are already present in the courtyard, talking together in small groups. I
see Nova talking to a handsome man with dimples, and can’t help but gasp.

“What’s wrong, Deeta?” asks Fay.

“I think Nova forgot her skirt this morning!”

“From the looks of it she forgot half her top too,” comments Jan dryly. “Very
classy.”

“I’m surprised that man can talk to her! With the amount of leg she’s got on display
I’d be tongue tied; I’m surprised he’s not blind. Who is he any way?”

“Jayden,” answers Fay. “That would be my uncle, Jayden. Or, wait… maybe it’s
Cayden?” Her brow wrinkles thoughtfully. “It’s impossible to tell them apart without
making them take their shirts off. Cayden has a scar on his stomach from when he
was shot last year. No, it’s got to be Jayden; Cayden rarely leaves the lab, he’s not
really very sociable.”

“That’s brilliant; more girls our age should have uncles that look like that, it would
be so useful,” observes Jan.
“How did your uncle get shot? I wouldn’t have thought it possible for anyone who wanted to harm him to get past the Great Hall.”

The girls look from one to the other nervously, then Jennet answers.

“Cayden was out in the City at the time. Orin was furious when he found out what had happened; he banned the twins from leaving the compound afterward. Cayden’s still grumpy about it now; he says he’s too old to be forbidden to do anything.”

“Why wouldn’t… Orin, was it… let him go out into the City?”

“If Jayden hadn’t managed to get him back when he did, Dr Burns said that Cayden would have died.”

“Oh, I see.”

I take another look at the man conversing easily with Nova. He looks so nice, cheerful, yet he could be a killer. The blood thickens in my veins.

“Are any of your other uncles here?” I ask.

“Sure, most of them. Not Ryder or Jeshua, and Tom’s never here, he lives outside the compound.”

“Hello, Fay, how are you?”

The speaker is a tall man with curly dark hair, and brown eyes that contain an expression of sardonic amusement. He smiles at Jan and I, and for a second I struggle to remember my own name.

“I’m fine thanks, Val. I didn’t expect to see you here; I know how much you hate these gatherings.”

“And why would Val hate gathering with his family?”

The new voice enters the conversation from over my shoulder causing me to jump violently.

“Jayden; you scared Deeta half to death!” reproves Fay.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.” Jayden’s voice sounds genuinely regretful, and his grin is rueful.

“That’s alright, I’m fine.” My voice is unsteady and quiet, partly because he did startle me, and partly because I’m wondering if I’m standing in close proximity to a murdering psychopath.

I turn to look at the first interloper of our little group. What had Fay called him? Val! A frown has settled on his face.

“What are you doing here, Jayden?”

The question is extremely abrupt and sounds very rude.

“I’m socialising,” responds Jayden coolly.

“I thought you were meant to be supervising the repairs on the east wall?” continues Val.

Jayden stiffens.

“You seem to know a lot about my movements, Val. I didn’t know I was such an interesting person.”

Both men stare at each other, hostility simmering beneath their pleasant veneer. I feel as though I’ve been dropped into the middle of a battle zone. Fay doesn’t seem to see anything odd in their verbal sparring; I hear her prattling away to Tina about the lace on so and so’s dress.

“Can either of you sail?” I blurt out into the uncomfortable silence. Both men turn to look at me in vague irritation.

“If its sailing you want, then I’m your man!” replies a voice just behind me.

I wish these people wouldn’t insist on creeping up on me and making me jump; it’s tearing my composure to shreds. He is younger than Val I would say, but older than Jayden, and though he smiles at me his attention is on the other two men.
“I’m sorry; I don’t know your name,” I begin, helplessly looking for Tina or Fay. They have drifted off, leaving me stuck in the middle of a hostile trio.

“My fault, I forgot my manners. My name’s Dagny.”

“I see and, have I got it right? You’re all brothers aren’t you?”

There is a momentary, and very telling, pause before they all hasten to assure me that I am correct.

“To be precise we’re half brothers,” amends Dagny. “Same father, different mothers.”

“Oh, that’s… interesting.”

I smile nervously from one to the other of these strange men reflecting that, going on first impression, any one of them could be a power hungry murderer.

“Perhaps you’d like me to take you out on the water later?” asks Dagny.

“You mean in a boat?” My voice cracks.

Great! The possible psycho wants to get me alone in a boat with him so that he can sail into the middle of the lake, chuck me in, and let me drown.

“No, no! I don’t think so, I can’t swim and…”

“You don’t need to be able to swim, you’ll be in the boat not the water,” laughs Dagny.

“And I get sea sick! Really, really, quite horribly, sea sick!”

“But I thought you said you’d never been sailing before, Deeta?”

Fay, rather callously, rejoins the conversation at this point, and for a few seconds I flounder.

“Deeta gets very car sick, as one of your platoons could tell you. What she means is that often people who are car sick are also sea sick, and are prone to altitude sickness too.” Jan enters the conversation, handing me a drink and smiling at everyone. “If I were you I wouldn’t risk it!” she ends, addressing Dagny.

Introductions are again made, and my heart rate returns to a more relaxed speed.

“So you’re the girls Ryder is… looking after?” asks Jayden.

“Yes, we’re Marshalls,” answers Jan, ignoring the faint pause in his question.

I see by the involuntary tightening of her hand that his meaning wasn’t lost on her.

“Marshalls, huh?”


“I guess we aren’t in your good books then,” hazards Val.

“Let’s just say that there’s room for improvement,” answers Jan.
I begin to edge away from them, and finally find myself standing beside an empty table. Sitting down I pull the ring on the can of coke Jan gave me, but it comes away in my hand, leaving the can unopened. I sit down and try to relax. Staring at the can, I try to shake off the unpleasant sensation that the last few minutes have given me.

I don’t like this.

I don’t like suspecting every Andak brother I meet of wanting to kill off all his siblings, and I really don’t like being caught up in their politics. Everywhere I can feel the segregation; the different tables have almost no interaction with each other. I have the unpleasant feeling that everyone is watching everyone else with suspicion and mistrust. I could see it in Jayden, Val, and Dagny's eyes.

Tom said that before his father’s death, and the setting up of the council, he had been unaware that he possessed any brothers but Ryder. Had that been the same for all of Paul Andak’s children? Had they all lived in ignorance of one another?

I feel sick with apprehension, with the knowledge that one of the men in this room is a monster whose lust for power has driven him to commit unspeakable evil.

“Would you like me to open that for you?”

I look up to find a young man with his hand held out toward me. His brown hair is parted slightly to the side and smoothed back neatly. Shy brown eyes look down at me, but it’s not these things that stir my memory. In truth his looks are quite unremarkable. It’s his voice, soft and quiet yet somehow carrying, that is instantly recognisable to me.

“Thank you.”

He takes the can from my hand and picks up a knife from the table. A moment later I hear the hiss of gas escaping.

“An object is only as strong as its weakest point.” He smiles down at me. “My name’s Jimmy Brook.”

“Deeta Richards.”

We shake hands, and he gestures to the seat across from me.

“Would you mind if I joined you?”

“Sure; we’ve met before haven’t we? That first day, in the town hall?”

Jimmy Brook looks startled.

“I… yes. I’m surprised you remember me, I didn’t think that you would.”

“Why not? You were the first person, after Ryder, that we met.”

“And Nova was the second.”

“Yes.” It’s my turn to look surprised, then I laugh. “I guess we must have looked a bit… unusual… walking through the hall in our pyjamas!”

“A little.”
“So what is it that you do here, Jimmy Brook?” I ask. “Sorry, was that an impertinent question? I’m just not used to... all of this.” I gesture to our surroundings. “I’m not sure quite what I’m supposed to say.”

Jimmy Brook smiles, and his face relaxes. I notice that his features, although plain, are rather nice somehow. He’s not handsome, his face doesn’t have the strength to be called that, but friendly and warm. Nothing like the Andak brothers, who seem to have been gifted the sort of good looks that make a girl feel threatened. Against such an unfair advantage, how can a girl possibly be expected to think straight enough to act wisely?

“I’m a techy,” answers Jimmy. “And a bit of an odd job man.”

“Techy? I’m sorry.” I shake my head. “I’m not sure what that is.”

“I’m a technical adviser, give me a computer and some time and I can do pretty much anything.”

I spread my hands.

“I’m afraid I’m not really any the wiser.”

“Never mind; girls aren’t very interested in that sort of thing, not pretty girls anyway.”

As he registers his own words he blushes, and looks over to the other side of the courtyard. I see his lips tighten into a thin pale line, and turn to see the object of his consideration. Nova is sitting on the top of a table, her long legs stretched out in front of her and her already short dress hiked up alarmingly.

As we watch I see her laugh at something Jayden has said to her, and she tosses her hair over her shoulder, simultaneously running her hand down her thigh. I hear Jimmy’s sharp intake of breath, and watch an angry flush suffuse his face.

“She’s very pretty,” I begin softly.

“What? Who is?”

“Nova; she’s very beautiful.”

“Yes, she is.” He looks up from the table cloth with a twisted smile. “Too pretty, she knows that she should be some sort of a princess.”

“I don’t understand.”

Jimmy shifts in his chair, his eyes travelling back to where Nova sits. In his face I see longing and devotion.

“Nova has her eyes on a prize, not a second rate souvenir like me.” His voice is bitter, but he manages a self depreciating smile. “I can see where she’s coming from. I can hardly talk can I, picking her; she’s not exactly a dog, is she?”

I repress the urge to tell him that some would say that’s exactly what she is.

I smile feeling more relaxed than I can remember feeling for a long time. I think it’s because Jimmy doesn’t want anything from me. I have no need to worry that I might let something slip that could endanger Tom and Dec.

“How long have you lived here?” I ask.

“Since I was six years old; I was brought in as a captive along with my mother.” He looks down at the table cloth. “It seems so long ago now.”

“Do you remember living outside Andak city?”

“I remember some things; the struggle, everyone always being worried about food and water,” he smiles. “You know, all the grown up things that a boy of six didn’t fully understand.”

“It must have been strange when you got here and everything was so different.”

“Not really, children have a wonderful ability to adapt. I took it in my stride with creditable ease. When you learn your place in the scheme of things as a child, it’s much easier to accept.”
“Accept what?”
“I don’t know.” He smiles again, that same self deprecating half grin. “That you aren’t all that important, I suppose. It’s not quite the same for you though, you look like Andak material.”
“I don’t think so.” I shake my head, and for a second there is a pause. “Jimmy you’ve seen what it’s like out there in the City, you’ve lived there. Don’t you think it’s… wrong somehow, for all of us to live in here like this, with all of this, when out in the City there are people wondering if they’ll be able to survive for much longer? Don’t you think it’s wrong to just pretend that it’s not happening? Ever since I came here I’ve been asking myself why nobody seems to notice. Why does no one care what’s going on outside their perfect little world?”
“Such a very deep and meaningful conversation, not really suitable for a barbeque. It kills the party atmosphere, don’t you think?” Ryder’s voice is pleasant enough, but I detect a faint tone of anger. “Thanks for keeping my seat warm, Jimmy.”
Ryder takes a grip on the back of Jimmy’s chair, and for a second I think that he’s going to tip Jimmy onto the floor. Jimmy, it seems, has learnt his place in ‘the scheme of things’ very well. Without a word to either of us, he slips from his chair and melts into the crowd. Ryder sits in the vacant seat and lounges back, balancing on two legs.
“Perhaps you’d like me to explain what I meant when I told you to keep as quiet and as uncontroversial as possible?”
“I was only asking,” I reply defensively. “If you don’t want me to ask anybody else, why don’t you answer my question?”
“Where the heck do you get off?” Ryder leans forwards across the table, his voice dropping to an angry whisper. “You don’t know anything about us other than what you’ve heard, and I wouldn’t set much store by those old stories.”
“For your information I wasn’t told any vile stories about the Andaks’ misdeeds. My father had no wish to sully my mind with such seedy filth! And I see no reason why my perfectly reasonable question shouldn’t be answered. You have everything here that’s needed to rebuild the City, but instead of helping you stand by and let innocent people die! So tell me, Ryder; how do you sleep at night?”
“I count sheep as I drink my horlicks.”
“I find counting backwards from a hundred a few times much more effective,” interjects Jan, joining our table.
Ryder stands and pulls out a chair for her. His calm face belies the anger that I know simmers just beneath the surface.
“Why do you have trouble sleeping?” continues Jan conversationally.
“Apparently because I have the blood of countless innocents on my hands.”
I see Jan look across at me with sudden insight, and her eyes narrow momentarily in concentration. Then she turns a bright smile on Ryder.
“That doesn’t sound too nice,” she observes. “Perhaps it’s an exaggeration?”
Ryder’s eyes meet Jan’s and their gazes hold for some time. I’m not sure what it is that he sees in her face, but he stands suddenly and excuses himself.
“Not at your tactful best today, are you, Deet?” asks Jan, watching Ryder’s departure from half closed lids.
“I didn’t mean to… I just don’t understand!”
“I know, Deeta.” Jan reaches out and pats my arm. “You know it bothers me too.”
“Then why don’t you ask him?”
For a moment Jan is silent, considering her rose hued finger nails, her head to one side.
“Deeta; nothing is as clear cut as it seems at first. I don’t know why things are the way they are here; why no one seems to care about the suffering outside in the City. However, I’m ready to believe that there is something standing in the way that we don’t know about.” She shrugs slightly. “You saw how Jayden, Val, and Dagny were together! You saw the mistrust, how they watched each other like gladiators in an arena. How can they solve everyone else’s problems when their own are as basic as trust?”

“I wish Dad was here, Jan.”

Jan’s hand tightens convulsively on my arm, and I see her beautiful eyes fill with tears.

“So do I, Deet, more than you know.” She manages a half smile through her tears. “Come on, let’s get something to eat, then we won’t have to talk to anyone else.”

We make our way to the sparsely populated buffet table. I look at the many beautifully presented dishes and feel the weight of depression settle over me, a guilt that pervades my whole body.

It takes a few moments for her voice to penetrate the miserable fog around my brain. The nagging insistence of Nova’s tone is hard to ignore, and I find myself eavesdropping.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw you and Val at the same party! Oh no, wait, of course I do! It was the night you broke up, wasn’t it, Charlotte?”

Jan’s eyes meet mine and our jaws drop; Nova has managed to take spite to a whole new level. I remember back to what Mari had told us of Val and Charlotte Brennan’s failed romance, and of Nova being the primary culprit. I sneak a quick look behind me, curious as to how Charlotte is taking this. She has straight, rich chestnut hair that reaches to her waist, and large grey eyes which are currently filling with tears.

“He’s looking great, isn’t he? Like his old self. I don’t think being engaged suited him at all. He looked so worn all the time; it’s just as well you didn’t marry him, he wouldn’t have been recognisable.”

She puts her unopened can of coke down on the table, so that she has a free hand to reach for some delicacy that has taken her fancy from a loaded tray.

“You haven’t been to the dining room for an age, but you’ll be pleased to know that he’s not still hung up on you or anything. In fact he’s back to his old tricks. The babe table has officially made a comeback, and he looks right at home sitting slap bang in the middle of it.” Nova laughs, and I practically feel the waves of hatefulness flooding from her. “What were you thinking Charlotte? Did you really imagine that he would choose you over me?”

I see Jan’s lips compress into an indignant line, and then a sudden sparkle of mischief enter her eyes. She reaches a surreptitious hand past me, and slides Nova’s can of coke from the table. Nova has her back to us, and is so intent on torturing her quarry that she doesn’t notice the action.

At first I don’t grasp her intention. She holds the can between us, looking up at me with eyes that gleam wickedly. A smile tugs at my lips as I catch on. I love Jan dearly, but you do not want to get in her bad books. Without a hint of trepidation she shakes the can violently, and then places it next to Nova.

We move away and sit at our table watching as Nova, finished with Charlotte for the moment, threads her way back to her seat. She sinks into the chair next to Jayden, her smile filled with dazzling sweetness.

“Any second,” remarks Jan, folding her napkin across her knee, and reaching out to take her glass of orange juice.
Nova is laughing at something Jayden has said, leaning forwards and making spectacularly flirtatious eyes at him, when she opens the can. The explosion of fluid is quite phenomenal; it sprays straight into her face and hair, and travels down her face to drip from her chin.

For a second there is complete silence, and then Jayden begins to laugh. He has the good manners to try and disguise the sound as a choking cough. Nova stands, subjecting the gathered people to an incredibly hard stare, as if daring them to find her amusing. Even under the fierce anger in her eyes I feel the need to bite heavily on my lip. Her hair is clinging to her cheeks in a sticky mess, and mascara and eye shadow streak her face. Very slowly she picks up the glass in front of Jayden, and pours it over his head.

“No one laughs at me, pal!”

Jayden is silent, looking up at her with orange juice dripping from the end of his nose. For some reason I have no wish to laugh at him.

“No to your face anyway; generally we have the courtesy to wait until your back’s turned,” he answers coolly.

Nova slams the empty glass back down on the table, and strides out of the courtyard with a decided flounce. For a while Jayden stares after her, and then he turns back to the other people sitting at his table and grins.

“Pardon me.” He gestures to the orange stains on his jacket. “I’m a messy eater!”

A murmur of laughter ripples round the gathered people. The hum of conversation fills the air once again, picking up where it had broken off abruptly a few moments before.

“So this is lunch with the Andak?” Jan looks across at me, a faintly satirical gleam in her eyes. “Makes you wonder about dinner, doesn’t it?”
Chapter Twenty-One

Deeta

The pavilion is even grander close up and set against the starlit sky. It has marble steps leading up to its floor, and columns of marble stretch up to a vaulted marble ceiling. Its structure is oval, and glittering chandeliers bathe everything in a warm light.

Jasmine and roses climb the arches and columns, and beneath these bowers around the outside edge of the room are small round tables, covered by pristine white cloths. The resulting splendour is hard to take in all at once and I find myself being led, unresistingly, by Ryder to a quiet corner.

“What do you think so far?” Ryder Andak asks as he pulls Jan’s chair out for her.

“Let’s just say you have an unfair edge,” answers Jan, depositing herself into the chair with a smooth swish of silk.

Ryder comes around the table to help me into my seat.

“And you, Deeta?” His voice has hardened imperceptibly, and I see a cold edge of steel in his eyes.

“It’s beautiful.”

He moves to take his seat, his shoulder brushing against the jasmine. The disturbed flowers’ scent is released and wafts gently across to me. It occurs to me that it’s too early for jasmine and roses, unless they have some sort of heating system to nurture the tender blossoms.

Music plays softly; a piano, a clarinet, three violins, and a cello. Several couples sway dreamily to their rhythm on the parquet flooring.

“You see the man dancing with the lady in the red dress?” asks Ryder. “That is my half brother Jeshua and his wife Devina. Jeshua is my father’s second son by Rebecca, his second wife. The girl in the dark pink dress with black hair is Hayley, my father’s only daughter by his third wife Nadia. She’s dancing with her husband, Neil. It’s Jennet that will be of the most interest to you, she’s the girl in the green dress. Jennet is Dec’s oldest sister.”

“We met her this afternoon; who’s the young man she’s dancing with?” asks Jan.

“That’s Dorian; his mother’s family were politicians, and his father’s family were Monaco’s royal family,” replies Ryder.

“I bet they don’t let anyone forget it either,” laughs Jan.

“You’re quite right; they still use their titles.” The faintly sardonic note in his voice fades and he shrugs his shoulders. “It’s understandable, I suppose.”

A young man in a white jacket comes and stands quietly at Ryder’s elbow.

“Hello, Nick, what’s cooking?” asks Ryder, taking a slim pamphlet from his proffered hand and perusing its script.
“You’ll have to help me out girls; do you like vegetables and fish? Or are you meat eaters?”
Jan leans across the edge of the table, her hand outstretched. The single ringlet trailing over her shoulder brushes Ryder’s sleeve. Is it just me or does he seem to be a little warm?
“May I see?” she asks.
“Sure.” Ryder pulls away a little, an inscrutable look on his face. I don’t think Jan notices, she’s already reading the gold edged leaflet, a slight furrow between her brows.
“Do you need some help?”
“No, thanks.” Jan looks up, a mocking light in her eyes. “Come on, mate, what do you think? That you invented the French language or something?”
She turns, placing the menu between us both.
“What do you think, Deet?”
I take in the gastronomic delights enthusiastically.
“I can’t decide between the prawns and the chicken,” I answer.
“Good; I couldn’t either.” She smiles at the waiter and orders both in her beautifully accented French.
Ryder’s face is comical. I can see him wondering how two barbarians, such as Jan and I, can possibly have command of a second language. I smile, thinking of Madam Delon, a French woman that had lived in our compound when I was a child. She’d been a sweet little old lady, and every day all the children in our compound had spent an hour learning French. As I recall, Ralph had spent most of the lessons throwing pellets of chewed up paper at his classmates’ heads. He’s always been a bit of a philistine.
Jan has ordered a soup starter, along with two glasses of lemonade, and profiteroles for dessert. I find myself filled with admiration at her ability to handle all of this. It’s as though she is in the habit of dining out in such extraordinary surroundings every night, and sees nothing special in the situation.
Ryder orders a salad starter, a steak and potato main course, and a raspberry cheesecake for dessert, along with a bottle of champagne.
“Are you hungry?” asks Jan, leaning her elbows on the table. She props her face in her hands, raising her eyebrows slightly.
“Famished,” replies Ryder, lounging back in his chair and fixing her with a practiced smile.
“You’ll get indigestion,” predicts Jan.
The charming smile slips from Ryder’s face, and it’s a moment before he laughs.
“You’re the first person, aside from Mari, to tell me that. It kinda kills the mood don’t you think? The romantic atmosphere disappears instantly.”
“There’s nothing in the least romantic about you feeding us to the dogs to afford yourself a little amusement. I hope you do get indigestion; I hope it keeps you up all night, and that you have a very long and trying day tomorrow.”
“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I have the great felicity of impeccable digestion,” he replies. For a moment there’s silence and then he leans forwards, pointing to a table at our left.
“Those are my brothers from my father’s third wife, and over there.” He turns again indicating another table. “Are the children of wife number four.”
“I don’t understand? Mari said that you all had dinner as a family, she said it was a big thing.”
“It is traditional, yes.”
“But… this isn’t having dinner as a family! This is frequenting the same restaurant.”
“Perhaps you’d care to elaborate?” His voice is a little tense, but his attitude as he
lounges in his chair is relaxed.
“Here, I’ll show you.” I turn a little in my chair and indicate one of the tables. “That
table is filled with the children from your father’s second marriage, that one by the
third wife’s children… can you see a pattern? There isn’t any togetherness; you might
as well be on your own separate islands. You’re not connecting with each other at all,
there’s no interaction.”
Ryder’s eyes show a flicker of annoyance, and as the silence stretches out Jan steps
in to fill the breach.
“Where’s Val?”
“How do you know Val?” Ryder’s tone is sharp. “When did he speak to you? What
did you say to him?”
“I didn’t, it’s just that Mari mentioned him in passing, that’s all.”
He looks slightly mollified, and goes back to twisting the stem of his wine glass
between long fingers.
“Look for a table populated by beautiful women, he’ll be there somewhere beneath
their frills and flounces.” His tone is snide and he turns back to me, unnerving me
with the directness of his gaze.
Our order arrives and conversation turns to tea time prattle. Mostly it’s Jan and
Ryder who talk and I sit silent, comforted by their voices, not easy enough to join the
conversation. Instead I steal glances around the room from under my lashes. It seems
as though everyone’s attention is firmly fixed upon their own small groups, but in
actual fact I see that our table has attracted much attention. Every now and then I see a
quick, telltale, glance toward us. By the time the second course arrives I have an
uncomfortable knot of apprehension in the pit of my stomach. Mari is right it seems;
we do not look to be welcome.
Ryder’s steak is huge, topped by grilled tomatoes, and set at one end of an oval plate
that looks more like a roasting platter. At the other end of the plate is a mountain of
creamy mashed potato with rich brown gravy. A plate of chicken in a yoghurt sauce
and lying on a bed of seasoned rice is placed in front of Jan, and for me there is a
bowl shaped arrangement of lettuce leaves filled with king prawns in a garlic butter
and cream sauce. The waiter eases the cork from the bottle of champagne with a loud
pop, and I almost believe that Ryder only ordered it to bring yet more attention to our
table. If he did then he quickly changes his mind about our exposure.
“What are you doing?” He demands in a half whisper, looking uncomfortably over
his shoulder.
Jan and I have pulled our chairs closer together, and have begun to sample each
other’s dishes with much enjoyment.
“We’re eating.”
“That isn’t eating, I don’t know what it is but — look will you just stop it! Come on,
stop it!”
“Say, Deet? Do you think they overdid it with the pepper?” Jan doesn’t seem to have
noticed Ryder’s interruption. She hands me a piece of naan bread stuffed full of
chicken, sauce, and rice.
“It’s great, I actually like the pepper.”
“I can’t watch… I just can’t watch! I mean, why do we even bother having our own
plates? Why don’t we just have a communal bowl for each table? Or even better a
communal trough for the entire room? That way we could just swill it out and we’d
save on washing up.”
“It’s not that big a deal,” placates Jan mildly.
“You’re taking food from each other’s plates; that’s anti-civilisation!” exclaims Ryder.
Jan and I regard him quietly, and for some moments there is something of a face off. Eventually Jan holds out a succulent morsel.
“Want to try some?”
For a second he looks horrified, then he grins. Ryder accepts the mouthful and is silent for a while as he chews with intense concentration.
“I agree with Jan; too much pepper.”
From then on things are more relaxed around our table. We find that Ryder’s steak is very tender, the mash and gravy are delicious, and that he doesn’t like prawns.
“When was the last time you tried one?” I ask sceptically.
“I don’t know; I guess I was about five,” answers Ryder.
“And you haven’t had one since?” I exclaim. “You have to try again.” I push the plate towards him, and after a moment’s hesitation he takes it from me.
“What do you think?”
“Not bad,” Ryder answers noncommittally.
“Thank you, Ryder; you’re looking rather handsome yourself.”
Her voice is soft and breathless. I hadn’t known she was standing behind me and, as I hear her words, the fork falls from my fingers to clatter on my plate.
“Oh, I’m so sorry! Did I startle you?” She leans forwards and places her hand on my shoulder. Her voice is amused and indulgent, as though talking to a small child.
“My but you’re jumpy… oh, thank you, Ryder.” She turns to give him a high voltage smile as he provides her with a chair, and pats my forearm as she sits down.
“There’s no need to be jumpy here, not when you’re among friends. At least…” She directs a sly smile towards Ryder. “That’s what you must tell people Ryder is!”
She smiles knowingly, and I realise she’s trying to get some sort of a reaction from me.
“Will you ever introduce me to your friends, Rye?”
“I was waiting until I could get a word in edge ways, Nova. This is Jan and Deeta Richards.”
“Sisters; isn’t that sweet! I should have guessed of course, you have the same laughter lines around your eyes.” She caresses Ryder’s arm. “You should be ashamed of yourself, Rye. Sisters, and you without the decency to date them one at a time!”
She laughs, a false tinkling sound. She continues to prod Ryder, trying to get him to confirm or deny the insinuations that she has levelled towards him. Ryder’s hand pauses, his champagne glass half way to his lips.
“Not at all; I thought one or the other of them would do for Tommy. Who knows; I might have the other myself.”
For a few unguarded milliseconds I see the full force of her hate, and then she smiles.
“You’re right; they’re charming, so simple and sweet. I don’t see how he could resist you, darlings.” She stands, her dress making a soft rustle as she rises. “I have to get back to my own table now, darling.” She runs her hand the length of Ryder’s arm to his shoulder, her diamond bracelets glittering against the black background of his tuxedo. “Try to spare a dance for little old me, won’t you, darling?”
She presses a kiss on to her finger tip, and lays it briefly against his cheek. Then with an airy wave she is gone.
“Deeta?”
“Yes, Janny?”
“Show me your hand.”

I raise my hand, palm up ward, on to the table. Bright red marks stand out lividly against the pale skin where my nails have dug into the softness of my flesh. Jan places her own, similarly marked, hand beside mine. Our eyes meet for a surreal moment before we begin to laugh.
“Deeta, did you ever?”

Again we collapse into giggles.
“I thought I was going to burst when she gave Ryder the octopus treatment, my sides were fit to split!”

Jan and I laugh until the tears stream from our eyes, and our laughter has been reduced to silent shaking.
“Well, I’ve seen many a reaction to Nova, but I haven’t seen that one before.” Ryder leans over, picks the napkin Jan has dropped from off the floor and hands it to her. She murmurs her thank yous and presses it against her damp cheeks.
“In any case, I think you can look after yourselves quite adequately.”

“Oh, were you worried about little old us?” asks Jan affecting Nova’s breathless diction, and leaning forwards to place her hand on his arm. Her berry red lips smile teasingly. “I’m touched, darling.”

We both begin to giggle again.
“Why what has he done?” Mari’s voice asks.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Deeta

Jan turns to greet her, but my gaze lingers for a second on Ryder. I see his hand wander to his collar, and then he reaches forward for his glass of champagne. Bringing the beverage swiftly to his lips he drains the entire glass.

With Mari are Tina, Jennet, Fay, and Jojo.

“Did you enjoy your dinner?” asks Jennet. Her voice is low and husky, deeper than is usual of a girl, but very attractive.

“It was delicious, thank you.”

“Mother tells us she gave you a bit of a scare yesterday morning.”

“Fay, stop it.” Tina elbows her sister, knocking her a little off balance. There was nothing spiteful in Fay’s remark, only amusement.

“That’s right, she did. I freaked out and ran to wake Deeta up, and we both crept down stairs armed with a vase. It was pretty embarrassing as both of us wearing nothing more than our nightshirts!”

“I wish I’d been there.”

Jennet chokes into her glass, but Ryder continues to play with the corner of his napkin, not seeming to notice the sudden hushed silence.

“To sort out the misunderstanding,” he continues smoothly.

“You have very pretty hair.”

I look down at Mari’s youngest daughter, glad of the distraction.

“Thank you, Jojo; you have nice hair too, it’s just like…” I bite my tongue. I had been going to say just like Dec. “It’s very pretty and so long!”

Jojo blushes, and giggles bashfully.

“I saw Nova came to be introduced, Rye?” Despite her calm voice I can see the strain in Mari’s eyes.

“Not at all; they were already acquainted, so it was more of a reunion.”

I feel warm fingers slide into my hand and look down, surprised to see Jojo looking up at me with sympathetic eyes.

“Poor, Deeta; did she make you cry?”

Behind her I see her sisters stiffen.

‘No, actually as I remember she said that I was charming.’

Jojo looks very surprised.

“That’s odd; she’s not usually nice. She’s always making Fay and Tina cry, and she really wouldn’t like you both because you have such lovely hair.” She leans towards me conspiratorially. “She has to get hers done to look that way you see; bleached.”

“Jojo!” Mari’s hand comes down on the girls shoulder, and I see a sudden hunted expression come into Jojo’s eyes. “That is not a topic of general interest. Fay and Tina
will take you back to our table for dessert, and then it will be time for bed. Go on now.”

Jojo's protestations are only half hearted, and she quickly resigns herself to her fate.

“Good night, Uncle Rye.”

Ryder leans forwards to accept her embrace and Jojo stands on tip toe, whispering something in his ear.

“I’ll see what I can do, mush.” He laughs, and Jojo plants a kiss on his cheek before hurrying from the table.

“I don’t know what to do with her sometimes! The things that she comes out with!” sighs Mari. “I’d better get her home; she’s obviously in a confiding mood tonight, and goodness only knows what she’ll say next.”

“She’s without guile,” answers Ryder, a half smile on his lips. “And before I forget; I told her I’d do my best to get her off the hook.”

“Is that what she was asking you?”

“Leave her as she is, Mari, she’s a good kid.”

“And you’re just a great big softy,” replies Mari laughing. “But I won’t read her a lecture, see you all later.”

I don’t really hear her good bye, but sit staring at the floor feeling dazed and uncertain. Even when Ryder stands and leads Jan on to the dance floor it doesn’t register properly.

I had expected so much more. After all the hype, all the warnings that we have been given, I had expected something… cataclysmic. It shows the difference between our society at home and the society here so sharply. It reminds me of something Catalina had said; that with a larger tribe there was more leisure time, she had said that that leisure time was spent ‘for the bad and not the good’. I hadn’t known what she had meant then, but I do now.

The Andak women who have paid for their position here have nothing to occupy them, therefore the most ridiculous things have become important to them. They spend all their time obsessing over being the queen bee, over the Andak men, and over their looks. These three things are the only things that hold any importance to them, because everything else is done for them. They have maids to keep house for them, to cook and clean for them, to cater for their every whim. They’re bored and devote all their time and energy to catty one-upmanship.

This elegant Eden of theirs, the wonderful compound that they take for granted, fills me with an odd sort of sadness. I wonder how they do it; how can they live in luxury, and spare no thought for the hoards of tribes outside their compound. There are so many people in the City to whom every day is a struggle for survival, a toss between life and death. How can the Andak be so unfeeling, so uncaring of the suffering that goes on outside the walls of this haven?

How dare they have the cheek to complain about anything?

How can they dedicate all their energy to putting others down and so they can feel good about themselves, when so much weightier matters, the suffering of so many, is not even given a seconds thought?

It’s all rather pathetic to see the brilliant exterior of everything about the Andak, and then to find out that beneath the beautiful and highly polished façade is a rotten core. Yet I remember that first day on the steps of the town hall Ryder had been conscious of his deficiency. He’d been ashamed and regretful that to him this beautiful place was only normal and what he was used to. Still, he had seen the world outside and knew he had much to be grateful for.
It seems a strange contradiction; the Andak seem to have so little thought for the other tribes, yet Tom had said that they protected the City from the Lewises and the threat of an invasion.

Without warning everything comes rushing back to me. The reason we are here, the danger that hangs over us like thick gloom, and the tightrope of trust that we are walking on so unwillingly. On the dance floor I see Ryder and Jan waltzing among the other couples; Andak men and women, Andak *brothers*. It all looks so refined, so civilised; yet one of them is a killer. For all I know, it could be the very man who has my youngest sister in his arms.

It would be so much easier if Ryder didn’t remind me of Tom sometimes. It knocks me so horribly off beam. When Jojo had kissed him it could have been Tom sitting there. In general Ryder’s features are faintly sardonic and mocking, qualities I’ve never seen in Tom, but as he was speaking to Jojo both expressions had disappeared to be replaced by amusement and ruefulness. Tom looks just like that when he knows that one of the children is trying to wheedle something out of him.

How easy it would be to put my trust in him completely. Isn’t that what I have been doing ever since we sat down to dinner? Yet I know I can’t carry on the same way. My stay here may have been short, but one thing has been impressed on my mind with searing clarity. Even if Ryder Andak is not the traitor that we need to suspect him to be, he *is* Andak; therefore he has his own agenda. Goodness only knows what that could be.

“Deet?” Jan’s voice holds a worried inflection and I look up, somewhat surprised to see her standing there. She’s looking warily from Ryder to me, a hint of trepidation in her expression.

“What? What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I was wondering if you would care to dance?” Ryder’s voice is stiff, and I have the horrible feeling that it’s not the first time he has spoken those particular words to me.

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

I place my hand in his and, as he pulls me to my feet, he addresses Jan with a smile.

“Don’t talk to strangers.”

We wend our way between the tables, and I try to ignore the fact that everyone is watching us.

“You’re blushing.”

“It must be the heat.”

Ryder passes his arm around my waist, pausing for a moment before taking his first step in time with the music. For a few seconds I am too preoccupied following his lead to notice anything very much about the experience. By and by I register that he dances well, in a similar style to Tom, but without Tom’s relaxation. I have a feeling that he isn’t enjoying himself, a feeling I never have with Tom. His hand feels icy cold through the fabric of my dress; Tom’s hands are always warm.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

I detect a note of dislike in his voice, and it stills any feeling of remorse at the bluntness of my reply.

“No, I’m not,” I meet his eyes frankly. “Neither are you.”

“Well, I don’t enjoy the company of people who are bigoted and ignorant.”

In my mind’s eye I see my hand connect with his face, jerking it sideways, and leaving a satisfying red mark. For a second I’m tempted to play out the scene in reality, but seconds pass and find me obediently moving with him across the floor, all my interest apparently taken up by his bow tie.
“Not much like your sister, are you? She wouldn’t have let that pass without an act of violence.” His tone implies that she is worth several hundred of me crystal clearly. I can’t deny the fact that I am conscious of a slight feeling of hurt.

“Have you nothing to say?”

“I’d like to see Dec please.” I keep my voice carefully neutral, wishing to give him no more cause for hard words.

“I haven’t decided if it would be wise to let you see him.”

“I’ll not tell you where Tom is until I have seen, with my own eyes, that Dec is safe.”

He stiffens, and his hand falls from my waist.

“I see. Very well; we’ll do this your way.”

With obvious control he politely offers me his arm. A little taken back, I tuck my hand through his. I hadn’t expected him to take my ultimatum so well. We move past the other couples on the dance floor, down the steps of the pavilion, and through the park towards the town hall.

The second we are out of sight of the pavilion, his hand closes vice like on my upper arm, pulling me after his striding figure at a run. The only time we pause is at the door of the town hall so that he can slip his key card into the sensor, but at no point does he speak.

Finally we come to a stop. In the dark I hadn’t known where we were heading, for a moment I actually believed that he was going to drag me right out into the City, so that I might take him then and there to Tom. However, he has brought me back to the holding room that was the first thing that I ever saw in this place.

“What are we doing here?”

Before the words are fully out of my mouth, he has thrown me against the wall. I stand, my hands either side of me, the breath knocked from my body and my head smarting where it came into contact with the hard surface of the wall. I gaze at Ryder Andak from frightened eyes, thinking that I’ve never seen anyone so angry before. In the half light of the dim room his eyes burn with rage, but his face is horribly white. He retreats, hands clenched, behind the desk. It’s as though he can’t trust himself to be any closer to me.

“I don’t believe it.” He shakes his head. “I almost, very almost, believed you! I told myself that you were lying to me about Tom, about everything, but I still can’t believe I was right!”

His eyes rake over me in disgust, and when he next speaks his voice is filled with so much loathing, my flesh crawls.

“You hide behind that innocent little face of yours and pretend that you care about the people of the City, but deep down inside you’re the Jezebel I always thought you!” His eyes blaze into mine across the room, and in the face of his hate I cower.

“What is he?” The words seem to be torn from the very depths of his soul.

“I told you; I have to see Dec first—”

“No, I’ll tell you what you have to do; you have to tell me where Tommy is!”

His voice is loud and harsh, and I can’t help cringing from it as I would from a blow. “I have to see Dec first.” My voice trembles uncontrollably, hardly more than a whisper.

“I’m not letting you anywhere near him; goodness only knows the ways that you have poisoned him already.”

“Then I’ll not tell you how to find Tom.”

“What do you think is going to happen?” asks Ryder in exasperation. “What are you trying to achieve; the destruction of what is left of your tribe?”
He slams his hand on the table, his eyes again raking over me with repulsion in their nadir.

“If you allow either me or Jan to see Dec, I’ll take you, and only you, to Tom.”

“You must think I’m mad or something. Do you really think I’m going to go goodness only knows where with you, to be met, I haven’t the slightest doubt, with an ambush? You must think I’m stupid!”

“No; I think you’re desperate,” I return quietly.

Ryder Andak’s eyes glare fiercely into mine for a few moments more. His gaze falters suddenly, and his body sags as he lowers himself into the chair behind the desk. For a long while his head remains unmoving where it rests in his hands, and the silence stretches out like a barrier between us.

“I don’t trust you.” His voice is quiet and tired. “I don’t like you, and I don’t believe you. But you’re right; I have no choice but to go with you.”

As he speaks his hand reaches out for the phone at his elbow. For a second he waits in silence, until someone answers his call.

“Mari, I want you to take Jan to see Dec. Yes, yes, I know; just take her would you?” He puts the phone back down and turns to me. “Well?”

“I can’t tell you were Tom is—”

“What? Listen to me—”

“I can’t tell you; I have to show you!”

Ryder pauses, arms ridged at his side for a moment, then his shoulders sag.

“Very well; we’ll leave tomorrow morning at six o’clock.”

His eyes are dull, filled with a kind of defeat. It’s as though he knows that I will betray him, believes that he will be captured, maybe even killed, and yet he will go along with it.

I feel helpless, so unsure. Everything I do jus seems to make things worse. I stand looking at Ryder’s sad eyes and stooped figure, and I feel a horrible weight settle on my shoulders. I know that I have changed him. I have altered his character by putting him in this position, through this experience. I feel as though I have betrayed him already.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Deeta

“Deeta?” Jan’s whispering voice floats across the room from where she stands in the doorway.
“I’m awake; did you see Dec?”
“He’s fine. They put him in a holding room at the other end of the barracks. From what I can tell he’s been giving everyone a bit of a rough time.” Jan’s smile is softly reminiscent.
“Did you manage to talk to him, alone I mean? Did you tell him…”
“Yes, Deeta, I told him everything. He knows what he has to do.” She pleats the coverlet between her fingers. “He was disappointed not to see you.”
My throat aches with tears.
“Not much, there wasn’t time. What about Ryder? He didn’t look too pleased when you left the pavilion.”
“He’s mad as fire, but he’s coming on my terms.” Unconsciously my hand moves to caress the arm that he bruised with his angry, unyielding hand.
“Did he hurt you?” ask Jan indignantly.
“No… I mean, yes… but I don’t think that he knew he was doing it.”
Vaguely I wonder why I am defending a man who, unless I am very much mistaken, would derive the greatest pleasure from wringing my neck.
Ryder confuses me. Sometimes it feels so wrong to suspect him, to not trust him. Then he will do something like he did tonight. Tonight I saw a side of him that I didn’t like; I saw hate and an almost murderous rage. In a way I understand it; he thinks that I have hurt Tom, that I’m trying to double cross him. I just don’t trust it.
Tomorrow I will enter the City for the third time in my life. Unlike the other times I will travel, not with a friend, but alone with an Andak.
“What about Keya?”
“I saw her briefly, she was in the next cell,” answers Jan. “Mari will bring her here tomorrow, I don’t think we’ll have any trouble.”
“That doesn’t sound very much like Keya.”
“Maybe not, but it’s the truth.” Jan looks away uncomfortably. “She cried, Deet. She shed tears of relief when she saw me.” Jan shakes her head. “I know it’s all her fault but… I felt so sorry for her. She was so scared and... and...haggard.” Jan pauses again. “I never thought that I would feel anything for Keya Green but dislike.” She looks up, and I see her beautiful eyes fill with tears. “I was wrong.”

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“Why are we here?” I look uncertainly at the rows of weaponry and protective clothing lining the walls.
“Just to pick up a few things; you know it isn’t safe out there without some form of protection, don’t you, Deeta.”

I couldn’t ignore the sarcasm if I wanted to. Ryder looks different and alarming this morning, his black suit has disappeared to be replaced by trousers and shirt in grey camouflage. The only thing remotely familiar, is the hair that is smoothed back in an orderly fashion, sleek to his head. I watch uncomfortably as he loads a hand gun and reaches for a rifle.

“You won’t need that.”

Ryder’s grey eyes meet mine.

“I’m pretty sure I will.”

I swallow convulsively; he isn’t behaving like the Ryder Andak I know. There is something sinister about him, his eyes are dead and cold.

_He could be a killer, Deeta, how would you know?_

I shiver a little. My palms are cold and clammy, and I smooth them down the fabric of my jumpsuit.

“No rifle, or no Tom.”

It takes all my courage to stand up to him. I wonder if he knows how close I am to fainting?

His eyes hold mine for a second longer, and then he shrugs.

“Whatever you say, you’re the boss.”

He turns, taking a gun from the shelf behind him, and holding it out toward me. I look uncertainly up into his eyes.

“Go on, take it.”

His expression is inscrutable, and slowly my hand comes up to take it from him. Ryder moves to pick up some magazines from the shelf behind him. As he turns his back upon me, I take an automatic of a similar size to the gun he has given me from the shelf beside me, and a magazine from the box beside it. I slip both into my waist band to nestle against the small of my back underneath the jacket I’m wearing.

I don’t know why I do it; maybe because I feel uncomfortable and mistrustful around him. Or perhaps I have learnt more from Tom and Nella than I realised.

Ryder turns and hands me a magazine.

“The gun I gave you; it isn’t loaded yet.”

As I load I feel his eyes upon me. For the first time in my life I truly know what it’s like to have my flesh creep. My hands shake and it takes me ages to load the gun. I bite my lip; I didn’t want to look inexperienced in front of him. The last thing I need is for him to know how easy it would be for him to crush me.

“Are you ready?”

I swallow jerkily and nod, not trusting my voice. I’m still trying to decide if mine and Jan’s plan is genius or insane as we leave the depot and begin our journey out into the City.

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The sky is a dark shade of blue-grey, hanging oppressive and low against the tower blocks. Ryder walks along silently beside me. He’s hardly spoken a word all morning, but the occasional glances that he’s cast in my direction have been eloquent enough in their own way.

I hadn’t visualised it like this. In my mind it had all seemed so easy; I would lead Ryder out here and the test would begin. The reality is far, far different from my imaginings. Walking through these eerie streets, it’s only just occurred to me that I
I have no idea where Andak territory ends. I can hardly lead him to a building in his own territory, and tell him Tom hides within. I’m not such a fool as to suppose that he would believe me.

Also I hadn’t really factored the Lewises in to the equation.

I’ve seen the result of skirmishes between our guard and Lewises, and I have no doubt that if we meet a patrol we’ll be in great danger.

Yet still I find that my nerves are most shaken by the man walking along beside me. Incredibly he seems, with every passing second, to gain in both size and fearomeness. A warning voice in the back of my mind keeps telling me that I have no idea what he’s capable of doing when he finds out about my deceit. More importantly, I’m not entirely sure what I am capable of if it turns out that he’s murderously inclined.

I suddenly realise that my safety hangs on Ryder being innocent, and feel a familiar nausea heave in my stomach.

Don’t freeze! I tell myself angrily, feeling moisture break out cold on my brow.

“We should stop here.” Ryder’s voice breaks into my panic, and I find myself gazing obediently in the direction of his pointing finger. As we enter the building I notice that its covering of ivy makes it damp and dark. It’s not the nicest of places to stop, I’m pretty sure that creepy crawlies run amok within its damp interior. I doubt whether Ryder would prove sympathetic to my fears though, so I don’t bother to voice them out loud.

“You’re not very fit.” Ryder remarks as I wipe my sleeve across my face.

If only he knew that my physical discomfort is caused by stress and not exertion.

“I thought you’d better rest before we leave Andak territory, afterwards I don’t care how tired you get; we don’t stop until we reach Tom.”

So we’re still in Andak territory, at least I have one less thing to worry about. I’ll lead him for another hour or so, and then I’ll pick a random building and tell him that Tom is inside.

“Which territory is he in?”

For a moment there is a frozen pause.

“What?” My voice, too high and trembling, escapes before I have time to think. Surreptitiously I slide my hand to where the gun rests against my back.

“You don’t know, do you?”

Ryder’s voice of suppressed anger sends tremors down my spine and I turn, hand out stretched and steady, pointing the gun at him. He sneers and advances slowly towards me.

“That gun has palm recognition technology; it’s programmed so that only I can use it.”

The bullet passes over his left shoulder and buries itself into the wall behind him. Ryder freezes, a look of wary surprise on his face.

“I’m not as stupid as you think.”

“You’re right; you couldn’t be as stupid as all that. So what happens now, Deeta? Some of your buddies arrive and cart me off… for what?” he asks. “I can’t understand what you think you can gain by all of this, except the destruction of your tribe, whatever’s left of it.”

I edge around until my back is towards the corner of the room, and sit down.

“You might as well take it easy.”

“You’re planning on being here for a while are you?”

Ryder places himself firmly in front of me with perhaps four feet between us.

“You don’t understand; no one should come, so long as you’re not lying to me.”
I rest the hand holding the gun on my knees.

“I have to know if I can trust you; I’d like to, but you’re making it very hard. So here’s the plan; I know you took a chance coming with me the way you did. I could have led you into a trap, and I know you thought it was a distinct possibility that that is precisely what would happen. Yet you were willing to risk it. The way I see it there is only one of two reasons why you would do that. One; you are genuinely worried about Tom, and want to see him safe. Two; you want him dead. If Andak troops turn up here, I’ll know that you want to harm Tom and I’ll have to shoot you.” I swallow nervously. “If nothing happens and no one comes, I’ll know that you really do want to help him. So tell me; is there anything you want me to know before we settle down to wait?”

Ryder is silent for a moment and when he does speak his voice is quiet.

“No one will turn up, I’m a man of my word. What happens when no one comes, you’ll tell me where he is?”

“I didn’t lie to you about that at first; I really don’t know where Tom is. However, I’m pretty sure that by the time we return to the compound Tom will be there.”

“How?”

“Because he was always going to give himself up to the Andak. First he had to see our tribe safe and settle Uncle Jep and the children with another tribe that didn’t know that they were Andak. It just took too much time, and the Andak moved too quickly, you moved too quickly. He took us to the Marshall’s because he knew it would take you more time to organise an attack on their compound than it would to organise an attack on us and the Clark compound. You moved quicker than he expected, or maybe he knew all along that he wouldn’t have enough time, but still knew he had to try.”

Ryder stares at the floor, and for a time the only sound is that of the wind howling outside.

“Tell me something about Tommy, about his life with your tribe?”

Ryder’s eyes meet mine, and for the first time I see no calculation hidden in their depths. For a startled moment I’m taken back.

“Like what?”

“It doesn’t matter; anything.”

I sit quiet and thoughtful, thinking back over all the years I have known Tom. I think of the laughter and fun… and yes, the sadness too.

“When I was about twelve it had become obvious that I would never be allowed to leave our compound, that I would never get to explore the City and the outside world. I was so upset; I felt… useless… and caged, like there had to be something more.” I remember suddenly just who it is that I’m talking to and blush with embarrassment.

“Anyway, Tom took me up to the roof with him when it was his shift for guard duty. It was such a beautiful day, the sun was shining and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Outside the look-out hut Tom had set out a picnic. We stayed up there all day, for the whole of Tom’s shift, it was perfect.”

“You said he had a family?”

“Uncle Jep and the children.”

“How many children?” asks Ryder.

“Five. Ricky is the eldest, the first Tom ever brought home, he’s fourteen. Then Roydon, he’s eleven, and the two girls; Carris and Tarri, eight and four.”

“And Dec,” adds Ryder quietly.

“And Dec.”

He leans back, clasping his hands behind his head.

“I can’t really imagine Tom with kids; you said he wasn’t married?”
I shake my head.
“Has he ever been?”
“No, at least… I don’t think so.”
“What about a girlfriend?”
“I don’t know; if he has he’s never told me,” I reply, faintly uncomfortable with the turn that the conversation has taken.
“So where do you fit into the picture?”
For a second I’m speechless as my mind takes in his implication.
“Tom’s my best friend.”
Ryder, in the act of drinking from his canteen, chokes.
“Poor Tommy.”
His voice is slightly unsteady with restrained mirth, and I smile along with him until it suddenly hits me that his comment is somewhat less than complimentary. I flush, avoid his eye, and for some moments there is an awkward silence.
“Tommy left us sixteen years ago.” He looks me over speculatively. “You couldn’t have been very old when he arrived?”
“I was four,” I reply. “Jan was two, and Clare was seven.”
“Who’s Clare?”
“My other sister.”
“Is she like you and Jan?”
“I guess? She has the same colouring and is about the same height, but her eyes are greenish and her hair is straighter than ours.”
“She sounds like she upholds the family tradition.”
“What family tradition?”
“Of having more than her fair share of good looks.”
“She’s married.”
The information is given far too quickly, and in too flat a tone, for him to doubt my meaning. I flush and change my grip on the gun nervously.
“That’s very nice for her.” Ryder offers me the canteen, shrugging slightly as I shake my head. “So we have ascertained that you are available and Clare is married. What about Jan?”
Ryder’s eyes are dark, and I can’t tell if he’s laughing at me or not.
“Jan’s eighteen.” My voice is nicely balanced between disapproval and annoyance.
“Yes, I know; my arithmetic is pretty good.” This time there is no mistaking the amusement that lurks in his eyes. “I didn’t ask how old she was, but if she is taken?”
I hesitate indecisively, trying to think of the correct response.
“Dad doesn’t encourage us to have boyfriends we have no intention of marrying.”
“Very appropriate.” Ryder leans forwards. “So?”
“She’s available, but that’s only because she’s picky and has very high standards!”
“Are you trying to tell me something, Deeta?” He smiles again. “Because I seem to remember that I have an ‘unfair edge’.”
“You’ll need a heck of a lot more than that you smug gi….” I manage to bite back the word before it escapes my mouth.
Ryder doesn’t seem chastened. He leans back against a handy pile of rubble and stares at the ceiling. For a long time we are silent, and I find my thoughts drifting back to the Andak complex. Jan will have explained our plan to Keya and outlined the part that she must play in events.
“Why is Dec in a cell in the barracks?”
Ryder opens his eyes and fixes me with an amused stare.
“I wondered when that question would finally come.”
“Why isn’t he with his mother?”

“Due to an unshakable belief that we are lying to him, and an almost hysterical desire for ‘Uncle Tom’ and ‘Aunty Deet’, Ryder replies. “We had several extremely uncomfortable scenes.”

“Which you didn’t expect?” I ask aghast. “Seriously; look at it from Dec’s perspective. You abduct him forcibly from his family and bring him to a strange place full of people he doesn’t know. He’s afraid and all alone, and you didn’t expect that he might be too traumatised and scared of you to trust you?”

Ryder kicks a loose stone with the tip of his boot and scowls.

“I didn’t think of it like that, I thought…” He stops and smiles ruefully. “To tell you the truth I wasn’t thinking of him as an individual, a person, but as Dax’s son and my nephew. More as Andak property than anything else.”

“So you were completely unprepared for an angry and upset young boy.”

“Not so much unprepared as horrified,” admits Ryder candidly. “One minute he’d be fighting us with all his strength, and the next he’d be crying and hysterical. It was like my worst nightmare but… worse.”

I smile at the look on his face at these remembered horrors.

“I shouldn’t laugh. Poor Dec, he must have been so horribly alone.”

There is silence between us again, both of us knowing that in Dec's unhappiness we have each had a hand. For a long while I sit with my face averted but, at some slight movement on Ryder’s part, I turn to face him again. My eyes collide with the gun he’s pointing directly at my head, and my mouth dries out.

“You ought to have relieved me of this the second you pulled a gun on me.”

The gun falls forward until it hangs upside down, suspended from Ryder’s crooked finger. I hesitate nervously before taking it from him with an unsteady hand.

“You could have had an accident, Deeta. If I’d wanted to, I could have put a bullet through you and told everyone back at the complex that we met an enemy tribe and you got hit. It would have been easy; no one would have known for sure if I was lying or not. To be blunt who, except for Jan, would have cared?” His eyes, steady and earnest, look straight into mine. “I don’t want to harm Tommy, or Dec, or any of my brothers, with the possible exception of the swine that is picking us off one by one.”
Chapter Twenty-Four

Tom

The hall is filled with people, making his progress slow. After the long wait just to get here, this last agonizing hold up seems somehow worse than all the rest.

“I didn’t know you were coming today, Tom.’

Jimmy’s quiet voice, still strangely audible above the hubbub of the great hall, catches his attention.

“I’m never sure myself when I’ll be coming, Jimmy, this visit is something of a surprise for me too.” Tom looks down at Jimmy’s slight, neat frame. “Is Rye over at the barracks?”

“No he’s gone out into the City with the girl.”

“The girl?”

“Yes; your brother seems to have got himself a girlfriend, or to be more precise, two.”

Jimmy’s voice is bland, but it has the effect of stilling Tom’s progress through the crowd.

“Really?” Tom manages to inject a faintly amused note into his voice, concealing the rushing thoughts and feeling of dread that washes over him. “I can’t think Nova’s too jazzed about another girl in competition.”

“Another two girls,” clarifies Jimmy. “Nova’s dropped out of the running altogether.”

“I dare say he’ll tell me all about it when he gets back,” shrugs Tom. “Pass the word that I’m here would you Jimmy; I’m off to see Mari.”

Jimmy’s voice again halts his steps.

“She won’t be home, Tom, she’ll be with the other girl.”

“As in…”

“As in Ryder’s other girl.”

“I see; and where will they be?”

“At Wisteria House, that’s where Ryder’s given them quarters,” answers Jimmy. “I’ve called my car for you; it should be waiting outside by now.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.”

The car is waiting by the curb as he steps out into the pleasant surroundings of the Andak compound. He’d been astonished to learn that Jan and Deeta were in Rye’s care, but on reflection perhaps it wasn’t such a big surprise. Ryder had a profound, if sardonic, interest in the female of the species, an interest that they seemed to reciprocate enthusiastically. Tom frowns, the ominous feeling of trouble deepening. Ryder had claimed them, had taken them to live in his mother’s house, and was at this very moment travelling the City with one of them, alone.

*Please don’t let it be Deeta!*
Please don’t let it be that; he couldn’t take it. He didn’t like the way that, just the thought of it, was making him feel.

He’d watched Deeta grow from girlhood to womanhood with a tense feeling of foreboding, knowing that with every passing year his feelings for her changed and intensified. He had also known that he could never act on his feelings.

It was impossible to bring upon her the disgust of the world outside the Andak compound, or the snappish hate within Andak territory. He was impeded not so much by the thought that it might make her unhappy, but by the feeling that he had for her.

Deeta hated confrontation and anger, and the Andak compound was rife with both. It was his duty to protect her from that and, if he could spare her from one moment’s unhappiness, he would do it. Even if that meant that he would never be able to tell her how he felt. He wouldn’t lie to himself and pretend that it didn’t hurt him to have Deeta so close, so trusting, and yet to be unable to do anything about it. He also knew that his hurt would only be made worse with the passing of time.

He had watched with jealousy her developing beauty, knowing that he was not the only one who was noticing. He’d had to accept that one day someone would make a bid for her affections and win. That man, whoever he was, would become more to her than he had ever, or would ever, be.

It was in Deeta’s nature to be loving and caring; he had seen those qualities in her from the very first. It was what had alerted him to the future problems he would face. That unselfish warmth of feeling that she had rained upon him and Uncle Jep had been a soothing balm, healing the wounds inflicted upon his soul as a blood Andak. He had resigned himself to the fact that she would one day love another, but he was damned if he would let it be Rye! He could only be unselfish up to a point. He would not let Ryder’s impulsiveness destroy all he had tried to protect.

The car pulls up outside the house, and Tom notices the wisteria draping the frame of the veranda in softly scented purple flowers. Then the door opens and Mari stands on the threshold.

“Hello, Mari.”
“Tom!” Mari pulls him in to her arms and embraces him wordlessly. “Thank goodness you’re safe!”

“Which one of the girls is with Rye?”
“Deeta. Why, what is it? What’s wrong?”

Tom feels the weight of depression settle on his shoulders.

A small figure bursts into the hall and cannons into him, winding his arms tightly around Tom’s waist and burying his head against Tom’s side. Dec’s body trembles as he holds him tight. A few anxious lines disappear from Tom’s face as he looks down at the boy’s dark head.

“Miss me did you?” He smiles and rests his hand on the boy’s dark, curly hair. Dec’s only answer is a muffled sob and to tighten his hold.

“Come on, Dec; I need to sit down, then you can tell me all about your adventure.”

Tom passes his arm around Dec’s slight shoulders, and walks with him into the sitting room. Jan is curled up in an arm chair, resplendent in a shimmering violet dressing gown.

“Hiya, Tommy.” Her voice is lazily welcoming, as though she’d seen him just a few hours before and saw nothing remarkable in seeing him again. He smiles.

“Hello, Jan.”

His eyes move past her to Keya who is perched nervously on the edge of her seat. Any anger or irritation he might have felt, disappears. She seems thinner; her hands
fidget with a red curl that has lost its patina of health, and her lips are bloodlessly pale, blending in with her milky skin.

“Hello, Keya.”

“Hello, Tom.” Her voice trembles uncertainly, and she only meet his eyes briefly before looking away.

Tom settles into the soft cushions, one arm hugging Dec to him, with his eyes fixed firmly on Jan.

“What’s going on?”

“You want me to start from the beginning?” she asks.

“It seems like the best place to me.”

Jan takes a deep breath.

“After you left the Marshall compound the Andak attacked. Deeta and I ran, but we were captured and brought here.”

She pauses to raise her hand to touch the back of her still tender head, and then dryly continues.

“I don’t remember arriving. I was still out cold, but when I did come round it was with a splitting headache. I was in a strange room all by myself, and I could hear some sort of commotion in the next room. I unscrewed the leg from the table and went to find out what it was. Deeta was struggling with a man in the next door, so I bashed him over the head. As it turned out he was your brother, Ryder. Deeta had pretended that she didn’t know who you were, but he knew she was lying when I told him we knew you.” She raises her hand. “I know, I know; clever Jan. Anyway Deeta told me that you had a traitor in the family, and she wasn’t sure if we should trust him.

So we decided to test him. Deeta told him that she would take him, and only him, to you. They’re out there now, in a random building, with Deeta pointing a gun at his head. If Andak troops turn up, he’s a bad guy, if they don’t… I guess we trust him.”

Tom has been regarding the top of Dec’s head in silence.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit of a haphazard and dangerous way of finding out?”

“Not rocket science perhaps, but come on Tom, we did what we could!” Jan moves restlessly in her chair. “We wanted to trust him, but we had to make sure. Heck, he tried to throttle Deeta at first!” Jan pauses for a moment before challenging. “Tell me that you’ve always held him above suspicion!”

For a moment the room is still as Tom, his eyes firmly fixed on Jan, remains quiet.

“If I ever was cautious of Ryder, it was for Dec’s sake. If it had been me on my own, Rye would have had my full confidence.”

“And if it had been just me and Deeta it would have been different too. But it was you and Dec’s lives that we held in our hands, and we had no right to risk them,” states Jan quietly.

Dec’s young voice falls into the tense silence.

“Is Ryder alright then, Uncle Tom?”

“Does he know?” asks Tom quickly, turning to Mari.

“He was told, I don’t know if he remembers. He didn’t believe us,” Mari answers.

Dec looks sharply at each of them.

“You mean they were telling the truth, Uncle Tom? He is my uncle and she’s my mother?” Dec’s voice is very small.

“Let me tell you a story, Dec.” Tom turns the little boy to face him. “When I was your age, my oldest brother Dax was worried that if I stayed with him and his wife, Mari, I would somehow get hurt. So he sent me with an old friend of his called Andres Jepsjon, to live somewhere where I would be safe. Then Dax and Mari had a baby boy, you Dec, and they loved you very much. They were afraid that you would
be hurt if you stayed with them, though. So they sent you to live with me and Uncle Jep, but it was a secret. They didn’t tell any of your other uncles, they were told you had been abducted. When Ryder found out where you were, he came to rescue you and bring back to your family.

“But you are my family, Uncle Tom!”

“Yes, Dec, but Ryder didn’t know you were with me and that we were safe.”

“Well now we can tell him and we can all go back home, can’t we? We don’t have to stay here,” pleads Dec.

“It’s not as simple as all that, Dec, we have to be patient. First of all we have to find out who wants to harm us, but to do that we have to stay here and have an adventure. You’d like to have an adventure, wouldn’t you, Dec?”

“An — an adventure?” Dec brushes away the tears from his cheeks, and looks at Tom speculatively from puffy eyes. “You mean like in ‘The Sooner’?” he asks, his voice taking on a breathless excitement.

“Yes, like in ‘The Sooner’. You’ll have to do just as we tell you, maybe…” Tom puts his head to one side. “I don’t know, maybe you’re too young after all,” he muses considering, but there is a smile in his eyes.

“No, I’m not! I’m not, Uncle Tom!” Dec is jumping up and down with excitement.

“If Pal can do it, so can I. I’ll do just what you tell me too!”

“Steady, Dec,” laughs Tom. “I haven’t even told you what it is you’ll have to do yet!”

“Aunty Jan told me. She said that I’ve got to pretend that I don’t know who you, Aunty Deet, and Aunty Jan are. I can do that, Uncle Tom, easy peasy I can!”

“It’s a pity Jak Dane’s not here to help us,” remarks Tom mournfully.

“Don’t you worry, Uncle Tom, we’ll manage on our own!” Dec looks around the room until his eyes alight on Mari.

“I say… um… could I…” Dec blushes adorably. “I know I said no before, but could I have that lemonade now?”

“Of course you can, I’ll go and get it.”

Mari disappears quickly, tears glittering in her eyes.

“Hey, Uncle Tom.” Dec turns worried eyes towards him. “You don’t think I upset her do you?”

“No, Dec; you made her happy.”

“I did?” asks Dec awed. “Well then I’m going to drink lemonade until I burst!”

Tom laughs, and pulls Dec into his arms.

“Ah, Dec, I missed you, you little tyke.”

The little boy looks highly gratified at this declaration, but pulls back from his embrace, fixing serious eyes on his.

“She’s very nice, but…” He leans forward confidingly. “Did you notice; her nails are red!”

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Deeta

“Back already, Ryder?”

Ryder turns to smile vaguely at Jimmy.

“Yes, we didn’t get very far before Deeta developed a blister and refused to go any further. I had to carry her most of the way back!” Ryder laughs easily. “Believe me; she’s not as light as she looks!”

“You missed Tom’s arrival; he came back not three hours after you’d left.”
Ryder’s eyes make contact with mine.
“Really? I’ll have to find him after I’ve dropped Deeta off.”
“You won’t have to; he’s at Wisteria House now, he went to see Mari,” informs Jimmy.
“How useful of him,” remarks Ryder. “See you later, Jimmy.”
With a wave of his hand, Ryder walks towards the doors and I trail dazedly after him. Although I’d known he would probably come soon, I can’t help the butterflies that begin to race around my stomach.
He’s here!
For the first time in a long time I feel hope and smile; at myself and my simple faith in Tom’s ability to fix everything. Mostly I smile because I know that my faith in him is not misplaced; everything will be fine.
Excitement courses through my veins as we pull up beside the house.
“Congratulations, Deeta.”
“For what?”
“For telling the truth.”
“Oh and which one are you; the pot or the kettle?” I ask indignantly. “After the whopper you told Jimmy, I would have thought that you’d be a little quieter on the subject of truth!”
Mari opens the door to find us laughing, and with longing and trepidation I enter the sitting room.
“Hello, Deeta, did you enjoy your walk? You won’t believe who turned up on our doorstep, begging for an invite in,” Jan informs me languidly.
Tom stands, and for a brief moment my eyes meet his. All I want to do is throw myself in his arms, yet for some odd reason I feel too self-conscious to do so.
“Aunty Deeta, we’re going to have an adventure, just like Jak Dane!”
Dec hugs me excitedly, and then draws back.
“Why didn’t you come and visit me in prison?”
“Dec, for goodness sake!” Even as tears smart in my eyes I find myself laughing.
“Don’t go around telling everyone you’ve been in prison!”
“Well I have and the books are right: the food’s just awful.” Dec grins up at me.
“Roy’s gonna be so jealous!”
I kiss the top of his head, squeezing him to me.
“Did you miss me?”
“You bet, the food was that bad and,” Dec looks around and lowers his voice, “and they put a rubber protector on my bed. It made such a racket it’s a wonder I got any sleep. I ask you; it’s one thing being poisoned, but did they have to insult me too?”
“That’s dreadful, Dec,” I reply, trying not to laugh.
“Well it shook me,” says Dec aggrieved. “I won’t lie to you; it did.”
He suddenly notices Ryder standing behind me and pulls away slightly, subjecting him to a steady inspection.
“Uncle Tom says that you’re alright.” He looks a little diffident. “He said that you were telling the truth.”
“That was nice of him.” Ryder meets Tom’s eyes over the little boys head. “How have you been, lad?”
“Not bad,” shrugs Tom. “I shan’t ask how you’ve been, I already know: busy.”
They shake hands, pulling together for an instant to thump each other on the back.
“I do have a question though; did Deeta really pull a gun on you?”
“Are you kidding?” Ryder laughs. “She tried to put a bullet in me!”
“I did not! I just let off a warning shot over his shoulder.”
“Most ghastly shock I’ve had in my life,” breaks in Ryder, “seeing as though I gave her a locked palm recognition gun. She swiped a manual when I wasn’t looking.”

“Bad choice of words, Rye, it reminds me that we have something to clear up.”

I unzip the front of my jump suit, and pull out my locket.

“Could you please tell Ryder that you gave this to me, he’s of the unshakable belief that I pinched it from you.”

Slowly Tom’s eyes move from the locket to Ryder, and I have the strangest feeling that in that moment they have a silent conversation.

“I gave it her, Rye.”

For a second longer they gaze at each other, and I move to sit on the sofa, pulling Dec down next to me and giving him a squeeze.

“Where did you go, Tom?” My voice is soft, and as Tom turns to face me I see a weary light enter his eyes.

“You remember me saying that we needed the Marshalls protection?” he asks. “It wasn’t exactly their protection we needed, more their numbers. I knew that when the Andak found out that Dec had been with me, they’d come for me. You see, nobody likes to say it, but we all know what’s happening; that we’re being killed off one by one. We pretend, but it’s just a ruse, because if we didn’t pretend we wouldn’t be able to live together in this place, would we? And besides, what’s that old saying? Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.”

He shakes his head.

“Anyway, I knew they’d think that I was the killer. I couldn’t let them come and destroy the Clark tribe, but I also couldn’t leave Uncle Jep and the kids with the Clarks to become outcasts. I needed time to settle them somewhere else, but we didn’t have the time. The Andak would need little or no preparation to attack the Clark tribe, so I had to move us to the Marshalls.

“I never anticipated that the Marshalls would have to fight; I didn’t expect it to come to that. I thought that maybe there would be enough time to settle Uncle Jep and the kids, and then give myself up before the Andak launched their offensive on the Marshall compound. The next thing I knew, I was hearing reports that the Marshalls had been wiped out, so I went back.”

For a second Jan and I freeze. Tom was not a very popular figure last time we were in Marshall territory, the subsequent visit that the Andak paid them will not have improved their opinion of him. I guess Jan pretty much sums it up when her jaw drops and she asks faintly.

“You mean, you walked into Marshall territory… and the Marshalls let you walk back out again?”

“I shan’t deny that for a little while things were decidedly sticky,” Tom smiles.

“Sticky! I should say so!”

“Tom did you see my parents? And Clare? What about Philip? Did you…?” I begin.

“They’re fine, Deeta. Clare and Phillip, your mum and dad, Nella and Ralph.” He turns to look at Keya. “Jamie’s fine too, so are Mr. and Mrs. Green.”

Keya remains stock still for a moment, and then suddenly her face crumples and she starts to cry.

“Don’t Keya, please don’t.” I slide my arm around her waist, and she turns her face into my shoulder, sobbing with relief.

“In fact…” Tom slides his hand into the inside pocket of his leather jacket, and pulls out a wad of papers. “I feel like the postman; there’s letters from both of your families here…”
Before he has finished speaking, Jan, Keya, and I are out of our seats, and have swarmed around him, snatching the papers out of his loose grip.

“Wow, I’ve got to remember that trick,” laughs Ryder.

“Oh, no!” My gasp casts the room into silence and the blood drains from my face, leaving me shaking and cold.

“Deeta, what’s wrong?” asks Jan quickly.

My eyes meet Tom’s guiltily.

“I’m so sorry, Tom.” My voice is hardly more than a whisper. I see understanding enter his eyes, and he raises his hand to rub the back of his neck.

“Ah yes, about that.”

“I thought he knew, I thought you’d told him.”

Tom rocks back and forth on his heels for a moment.

“Forget about it, Deeta, it’s not important now.”

Ryder looks from one to the other of us and then at Jan.

“I wish I knew what we’re supposed to be forgetting.”

He looks to his brother again, but I can see in Tom’s face that he is not going to give me away.

“I told Robin Marshall that Tom was Andak.”

Jan’s sharp intake of breath is audible, and her hand moves to cover her mouth.

“What did he say, Tom?” I ask with difficulty. “Did he… was he angry?”

“Let’s just say he wasn’t as pleased to see me as he usually is.”

“Meaning what?” Jan prompts.

“He tried to murder me,” grins Tom. “Don’t look so shocked; he calmed down after a bit, in the end he was quite reasonable.”

“What happened after that?”

“I came home, fully expecting to be escorted straight to a holding room the second I was seen.” Tom’s eyes meet Ryder’s, and I see a question in them. “But surprisingly enough nobody seemed to want to shoot me, throw me into prison, or even question me.”

Ryder grins, settling himself more comfortably in the large armchair.

“Come on, Tommy, do you really think I’d level an accusation like that at you?”

“You had more than enough evidence against me.”

“Evidence is for people who don’t know the person being accused,” dismisses Ryder. “I don’t care how much evidence was brought against you: I know that you didn’t kill Dax, Rothe, or any of them. I know you couldn’t do something like that.”

He shrugs. “That being the case what was the point in telling the others something that they would only misunderstand?”

For a second Tom stares at him in silence, gratitude spilling from his eyes.

“Thanks, Rye.”

“Don’t mention it. Really; don’t.”

Tom stands up and ruffles Dec’s hair.

“I have to report in.”

“I’d better come with you.” Ryder winks at us. “We’ll pick you girls up later and take you to the dance.”


“We always have a party when Tom comes home,” answers Mari absentmindedly. “Which reminds me; I’d better call through to the pavilion so they know he’s back.”

“We’re going to a party?” cries Dec enthusiastically. “This just keeps getting better and better!”
Chapter Twenty-Five

Deeta

“Hold still, Jan, there’s a gazillion buttons on this dress.”
“But it is so worth all your trouble, Deet.”
Jan smooths her hand down the bodice of her red dress lovingly.
“Mari said that she would ask Ryder to send around his mother’s jewellery for us to wear tonight.” Her voice contains a hint of sardonic amusement. “Apparently there will be rubies for me, and sapphires for you.”
“Which, being as he’s such a good boy, is exactly what he did,” drawls a deep voice.
“You ever heard of knocking, Ryder?” I ask.
“Heard of it, yes, but it’s not something I practice. It has the irritating consequence of alerting people to my presence. Besides, Dec brought me up.”
Ryder isn’t wearing a tuxedo tonight but a brilliant white dinner jacket.
“Have you seen the beds, Uncle Rye? They’re great!” Dec takes a running jump and lands, spread-eagle, on the four poster.
“You should have seen the bed at the last place we were in, Dec. You could have fitted five or six people in them, they were so big.” Jan tells him.
“What an interesting idea to be sure,” grins Ryder, placing two velvet jewellery cases on the bed.
“Don’t be too long, will you girls; I’m hungry.”
We wait until he has left the room before we open the boxes. Nestled against the interior of Jan’s is a pair of long ruby and diamond chandelier earrings, and a thick matching bracelet. Mine contains a necklace and bracelet with large, flashing blue stones surrounded by diamonds, and linked together to make a chain.
“You know, I’m getting too used to this,” remarks Jan, turning her head so that the earrings catch the light and sparkle brilliantly. “I’m going to be totally ruined for the real world after all this grandeur.”
I smile, thinking of the stir it would have cause if we’d walked in to a party in the Clark compound dressed as we are now. Everyone would have looked at us as though we were aliens from another planet. I finger the jewels. When we go back home this will all seem like a dream, but I don’t think that I’ll miss it. The Andak compound may be more comfortable and luxurious than the Marshall compound, but it’s also far more dangerous. I don’t like how Andak society works, I hate the manipulation and backstabbing that goes on behind the scenes.
I think I prefer the simple life; it will be nice to go back to obscurity.
As we walk down stairs I can hear Tom and Rye talking together in low easy tones.
“Contrary to a deep rooted belief that nothing could have been worth the wait, it appears I’m wrong,” smiles Ryder. “You were quite right, Tommy; the tanzanite is a much better match for Deeta.”

I see Tom’s head jerk sharply around to bend a frown on Ryder, but Rye doesn’t seem to notice. He raises his eyebrows and grins at Tom lazily, as if daring him to say something.

“You’re looking very red tonight, Jan.”

Jan tucks her arm through his.

“Aren’t you just a darling to say so? You look like a waiter.”

I hear Ryder laugh as they walk through the door and out on to the pavement. Tom takes my hand and pulls it through his arm.

“How did Dec take the fact that he couldn’t come tonight?”

“He asked me if I’d leave Jak Dane mouldering at home while I went off to save the world. I told him that eating dinner hardly qualified as saving the world, but it wasn’t until Mari showed him how to work the video library that he consented to stay.”

Tom smiles and bends down to tuck the train of my dress into the car.

“Are we going to have to leave Tom here, or is there enough room for him and your dresses?”

“It’s alright I’ll sit on the roof,” returns Tom with a smile.

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The pavilion is filled with music and people, their muted chatter loud yet indistinct. As we enter a hush falls, and a tall gentleman with grey hair and vivid blue eyes comes forward, his hand out stretched.

“Hello, Tom, it’s nice to see you back.”

“Thanks, Orin, it’s good to be back. You know Deeta, of course.”

The tall gentleman gives me a friendly smile, and shakes my hand.

“Actually no, I haven’t had the pleasure. I wasn’t here last night, but my wife’s description of you is unmistakable.”

I smile vaguely, and cling a little tighter to Tom’s arm. He and Orin continue talking for some time; I don’t really hear their words, but watch their faces closely. How can he do it, I wonder? How can Tom stand talking with the utmost pleasantness to a man who could be a killer?

Every time I have been confronted with one of Tom’s brothers the realisation that he could be the one, the murderer who wants all his brothers dead, has filled my mind, crowding out everything else and rendering me nervous and socially inept. However, with my arm through Tom’s I feel better, as though the weight of responsibility has transferred itself from my shoulders to his.

After some time another two men arrive and greet Tom cheerfully. They have dark curly hair and brown eyes, their features are identical. One of them, I can’t tell which one, is the man that Nova was with the day her coke can malfunctioned.

“Deeta, these are my brothers, Cayden and Jayden. Cay, Jay; this is Deeta…” Tom turns to me with a slight smile in his eyes. “I’m sorry; what did you say your last name was?”

“Richards, Deeta Richards.” I smile at the two men, placing them somewhere between thirty to thirty five years old.

“That’s right, I’ll try to remember.” He turns to the men. “I’m off to find a table; Mari promised me Pavlova and I intend to collect.”
We all laugh, and Tom and I weave our way through the crowd and sit down at a vacant table.

“Who were those men, Tom?”

“Orin is the last surviving son of my father’s first wife, Theresa. Dax, Ethan, and Roland were his full brothers; they all had ‘accidents’. The twins are the sons’ of wife number three, Nadia. Their brother Rothe also had an ‘accident’.”

For a while we are silent, looking out over the room.

“Is there anyone who hasn’t had a full brother suffer one of these ‘accidents’?”

“Ryder and I are the only brothers who haven’t lost a full brother.” He pulls his chair a little closer to mine. “You see that table over there? Those people are the children of my father’s second wife, Rebecca. Their eldest brother Rehu was the third of our brothers to be claimed by an ‘accident’. Over there are the children of Sadie, my father’s fourth wife. Their brother Devin is also dead.”

“I’m so sorry, Tom.”

“What for?”

“Because I didn’t know; I didn’t think how bad this must be for you. To me they’re just names; to you they are family, loved ones. I can’t even imagine how petty we must have seemed to you with our foolish squabbles.”

“You were never petty in your life, Deeta.” His eyes meet mine. “Sometimes I think that you and the children were the only thing that kept me sane. The quiet life I led with the Clark tribe is the only reason why I could deal with what was going on here. It showed me that the things happening in my tribe were not normal, that life could be free of the evil that I found every time I returned here.”

“Then why do you come back? If you hate this place so much, why return?”

Tom is silent for a moment, looking at me with dark, pain filled eyes.

“Because I have to. I can’t let whoever it is that is killing my brothers continue, don’t you see, Deeta? I can’t just walk away and leave them to die. I have to come back, I have to try.”

I’m not used to seeing him like this. Tom always knows what to do, he can fix anything. For so long I have seen him as a rock, a safe haven that I can turn to and cling to in times of need. I never saw, never stopped to think, that maybe Tom needed someone too. I know that I can’t tell Tom that everything will be okay; the glib words would be empty, meaningless. Still, I can reassure him in my own way.

“Tom?” I slide my hand across the table and rest it on his. “Tom, you’ll figure it out, I know you will. You always do.”

“But what if I can’t?”

“You can only do your best, Tom.” I smile at him gently. “And it just so happens that your best is brilliant.”

For a second he looks at me, then he turns his hand to take mine and cling to it with the fierceness of a drowning man.

“Why do you have so much faith in me, Deeta?”

“Because you’ve never let me down, and I know you never will.”

“What will Tommy do?” asks Ryder. “Or not do, as the case may be?”

I hadn’t heard Jan and Ryder approach, and when I turn I see that they are not alone. I would say she is around forty years old. Her skin is caramel brown, her hair jet black and soft looking, and she has a quizzical expression in her eyes.

“Minda, you’ve met Deeta haven’t you?” asks Ryder.

“No, but I saw her here last night.” Minda smiles. “It’s nice to meet you.”
Her eyes stray to where mine and Tom’s hands are clasped on the table top, before travelling on to Tom’s face. Tom greets her with a warm smile and unhurriedly slides our joined hands to his lap, sheltered from prying eyes.

“Minda is our step mother, Deeta,” explains Tom.

I smile nervously as she sits down at our table, along with the two little boys that are with her.

“And these are her sons; Raj and Naveed.”

“Deeta; such a pretty name.” Minda smiles friendlily. “I suppose you must have been asked how you like it here a dozen or more times, so I’ll try for something more original. Did you get that dress from Leighton’s or the Palace?”

“From Leighton’s,” I reply, slightly surprised by the question. As the topic seems harmless enough I decide to continue. “The Palace’s dresses were a little too flamboyant for me to carry off.”

“I know,” laughs Minda, “all those sequins and ruffles.’

“Don’t be led on, Deeta; you’ve just made it into Minda’s good books and I doubt that anything will ever blast you out of them. She’s the chief designer at Leighton’s,” explains Tom.

Minda leans across the table, and gives Tom a playful push.

“The girl has taste, can I help that?”

As they laugh together the little boy on my right, who has been staring at me for some time with a frown on his face, decides that the time has come for me to be favoured with his conversation.

“Do you play football?” he asks suddenly.

“I… er… yes, I do.”

Tom chokes into his glass of champagne.

“I said that I played, not that I was any good!” I exclaim, giving him a shove.

“Well you hardly could, could you?” laughs Tom. “Not with a straight face any way.”

I turn to the young boy again, pretending not to hear Tom’s uncomplimentary observations.

“What do you play?”

He nods his head enthusiastically.

“I’m a winger, Raj’s a midfielder,” he answers proudly. “Where do you play?”

“Generally on the opposing team’s side,” interjects Tom, doubling over with mirth.

“You think you’re so hot, don’t you? Who was it that headed the ball into their own goal last time we played?”

“That was different,” states Tom, turning to Naveed. “I was just trying to even the game.”

“It was nil-nil,” I remind him.

“But it was obvious that we were going to thrash them; I didn’t want them to feel embarrassed.”

I level a disbelieving look at him.

“Very smooth.”

“Oh, I know. I’m sharp, like a razor!”

“First I’ve heard of it,” comes Ryder’s voice from just behind me. “Say Minda, where’s Mark?”

As Minda turns to answer him, Tom passes his arm along the back of my chair and bends his dark head toward mine.
“Minda was my father’s sixth wife, she looked after Ryder and me until she was remarried. After that Dax insisted that I live with him and Mari. Rye was old enough to enter the guard by then. The boys are from her second marriage.”

“Tom —?” I hesitate. “Tom, how —?”

I break off unsure how to formulate my question.

“How come my father had six wives?” he finishes for me. “Well he didn’t have them all at once, if that’s what you were thinking. Theresa died of cancer before it happened, Rebecca left him, that was also before it happened. He divorced Nadia and Sadie, my mother died, and Minda outlived him.”

As he pulls away my eyes widen in alarm. I’ve hurt him, I didn’t mean to, but I really have. Why don’t I think before I speak, and take in to account how my words may affect the other person?

“Come on, Deeta.” Ryder’s hand is on my arm. “You owe me half a waltz; we never finished the first one did we?”

Before I have a chance to answer him, he pulls me to my feet and we move out on to the sparsely populated dance floor.

“Did you like Minda?” questions Ryder after some time.

“Yes.”

“She looked after us when we were smaller you know,” he continues.

“Yes.”

“The boy’s are mad on football, I suppose they told you?”

“Yes.”

“Come on, Deeta! This is like trying to squeeze blood from a rock!”

“I’m sorry; I was just thinking.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere; what about?”

Over his shoulder I see Nova regarding us with a particularly baleful stare.

“What’s the deal with you and Nova?”

“There is no deal.”

“Really?”

“Really. Why do you find that so hard to believe?”

“Because she’s beautiful.”

“So she’s beautiful,” he replies. “I know lots of beautiful women. Nova wanted to chase, I merely obliged her by running.”

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“Aunty Deet, are you awake?” whispers Dec, loudly.

“I am now.” I moan, turning on to my side and squinting up at him through half closed lids. “What do you want, trouble?”

“Nothing, I just wondered if you were, that’s all.”

I thump him with a pillow, and he falls back onto the bed and snuggles up to me.

“Was it a good party?”

“I suppose so, Dec. We didn’t play games or anything, it wasn’t like when we have a party back home.”

“What did you do then?”

“Well we had dinner and danced a bit, mostly we just talked,” I tell him.

“And they call that a party? It sounds boring! You should have stayed here with me and Keya. We watched this film called ‘Flight of the Navigator’, it’s about aliens and spaceships and stuff.”

“You sound like you had fun.”
“Yeah. We ate ice cream until we felt queasy.’ He sighs with satisfaction, and for some time we are silent. I’m just dropping off to sleep when Dec speaks again.
“Keya was really strange though, Aunty Deet.”
“What do you mean?” I mumble sleepily.
“Well, she didn’t tell me to shut up once. She just wasn’t like she normally is, she went all girly on me; fussing about and making sure I had everything I wanted. She even missed the end of the film to get me a glass of lemonade! And once, right in the middle, she started crying and saying she was sorry and hugging me.”
Dec looks at me out of wide eyes.
“I told her it was okay, she was being really loud and it was a good bit. You don’t think she’s crazy do you?”
“No, Dec, she was just a bit sad, girls get like that sometimes.”
Dec digests this piece of information before turning to me again.
“You don’t. You never bawl all over the place like she did.”
“Well she’s had a hard time here all by herself, Dec.”
“I guess.”
Dec shrugs his shoulders, dismissing from his mind the inexplicable workings of the female brain.
“Aunty Deet, can we go for a swim in the pool?”
“I don’t know how we’re going to manage that; neither of us can swim a stroke. It would be fun to splash about a bit, though, wouldn’t it?”
I scramble up from the bed, and open the cupboard that houses all of the clothing that Mari bought for us that first day. I’m pretty sure that lurking among the items is a yellow bikini. I find it and pull it out. It seems much smaller than I remember, but I don’t worry too much as it will only be Dec and me. I hesitate before opening the cupboard that contains Tom’s clothes, but Dec needs some trunks. I swallow the feeling that I’m invading Tom’s privacy, and rummage around looking for a pair.
They are, of course, much too large for Dec. We remedy this by tying a shoelace around the waist to hold them in place. When we’re both ready we slip quietly downstairs, leaving Jan to sleep, and close the door of the pool house behind us.
“Stay out of the deep end, Dec, because I can’t rescue you if you get in any trouble,” I warn as I begin to descend the shallow steps that lead into the beautifully warm water.
The pool is rectangular, about thirty by fifteen, and I’m pleased to find that the shallow end only comes up to my waist. I don’t intend to find out how deep the other end is. We splash happily for some time before Jan arrives, her cheeks still softly flushed from sleep.
“Janny, come in; the water is ever so warm!” invites Dec. His fringe is slicked forwards into his eyes.
“No, thank you, munchkin.” Jan yawns and settles her peignoir clad frame on to a sun lounger. “I’d much rather watch.” She regards us from beneath half closed lids, a sleepy smile playing about her mouth. “Did you sleep well, Deet?”
“Very well, but suddenly, in the middle of the night, this ghastly little boy came and woke me up by jumping all over my bed.”
Dec splashes me and I push him under.
“Aunty Deet, I’d been awake for hours and I kept ever so still so I wouldn’t wake you up,” splutters Dec, resurfacing. “Even though I was starving!”
“Well I suppose if you’re starving, we’d better feed you.”
Jan disappears through the door, with a hasty command to us to stay put. She is gone for a long while but we hear, quite regularly, the crash and rattle of pans. Finally, after much anticipation, she returns carrying a very large and heavily loaded tray.

“Master Dec...” She pulls out a chair and bows slightly. “Your breakfast is served.”

“Look, Aunty Deet! Jan’s made pancakes!” Dec exclaims as I endeavour to wrap a towel around his impatient form. “And, goodness: sausages for breakfast!”

He slides into his chair, tucking in with relish.

“Sugar and spice and all things nice!” I laugh, wrapping myself in a towelling robe. Jan pours out coffee into dainty bone china cups and saucers, and hands one to me.

“Please tell me there’s some coffee going spare?” Ryder’s voice startles me, and I spill some of the liquid from my cup into my saucer.

“Uncle Tom, look: sausages for breakfast!” exclaims Dec through a mouthful of pancakes.

“Did you sleep well, Dec?” asks Tom, accepting a cup of coffee from Jan. Dec nods vigorously, stuffing another forkful of pancakes into his already overfull mouth.

“Steady up, Dec,” I reprimand.

Obediently he lowers his fork, and begins to chew vigorously. I smile at his enthusiasm and lean forwards to pick up a pancake, but I pause as I catch sight of Ryder out of the corner of my eye. He is lounging back in his chair, his head to one side, a slight smile on his face. He’s gazing at Jan’s attractive nightwear with a little too much appreciation in his eyes for my liking.

“Could you pass the butter please, Ryder?”

His eyes meet mine, filled with amusement he doesn’t even try to conceal.

“You’re up very early,” remarks Jan. “And if you don’t mind me saying so, you don’t look all that rested.”

“We spent most of the night making plans,” answers Ryder.

“Plans for what?” I ask, passing Tom some breakfast. “Would you like some toast, Tom?”

“Yes, please.” He accepts the toast from me, and begins to butter it. “Plans to catch a killer, but we didn’t get very far, I’m afraid.”

“I wouldn’t say that!” objects Ryder.

“Well, we... I mean... you see...” flounders Ryder. “We didn’t get very far,” he finishes.

The sound of incessant buzzing cuts through our laughter, and Jan and I look around us in surprise.

“What is that?”

“I think that’s the door bell; you must have heard it before?”

“No; everyone lets themselves in to our house without warning,” answers Jan dryly.

“Are you expecting Mari?” asks Tom.

“She said that she would come round this afternoon, it’s a bit early...”

Tom stands, and disappears into the hallway. We hear him open the door and then the murmur of conversation. He returns, followed by several armed guards, a slight frown between his brows.

“An emergency meeting of the council has been called, Rye. We’re required to congregate at Andak Hall as soon as possible.”

Ryder takes a hurried gulp of coffee as he stands.

“We’d better be off then, see you girls later.”

He hurries to the door, but on realising that Tom is not with him, he halts and turns back.
“See you later, Dec.” Tom rests his hand on the boy’s head, and I hear him say something in Polish. Dec nods eagerly and Tom follows Ryder and the guard out of the door, closing it firmly behind him.

“What was that all about?” asks Jan.

“He said that we were to go to the pavilion and wait for him there,” answers Dec, he turns to me his eyes eager and excited. “Are we going to have an adventure now?”
Chapter Twenty-Six

Jimmy

He smiles; all this time and they’d never known. They had no idea who their enemy was, they just knew they had one. It had taken them long enough to come to that conclusion.

He could never have dreamed that it would work so well. Sure he was careful, he’d picked his moments, but they’d never even thought of him. As always he’d been invisible. It was strange to think that the very reason he hated them so much had proved to be their undoing, and consequently his salvation.

Andak…

How he despise the name. For him it conjured up all their oppression and power, their arrogance. Paul Andak had built an entire compound around them, to glorify them. Yet what was so special about them anyway? They were no more than the sons of an egotistical swine, an extortionist, who had preyed on the fears of others.

Yet once they had been ensconced in this place after the breakdown happened, what had everyone done but blindly follow him? They had willingly been seduced by a dream that was not their own.

He trapped them all in his power, and then played the king, lorded it over them, and they’d enjoyed it! They’d strengthened him, and had brought up their daughters to want an Andak and nothing else.

He thinks of Nova, of her icy beauty that is so far beyond his reach. The indifference with which she treats him in stark contrast to the affection she lavishes on them. She gave away her smiles, threw herself at them, only to be laughed at. For what; the hope that one of them would throw her a bone of approval? Her head is so filled with the desire to be called Andak that there is no room for anything else.

He feels sickened, disgusted by her and yet longing for her still. Well, she would see; they all would. He would drag their precious Andak brothers through the mud!

He thinks of Tom and Ryder, even now on their way to this place with no knowledge of what was in store for them. It had been easy, so easy. Dax’s son had been forever shouting for his ‘Uncle Tom’. Jimmy had listened and waited and watched, and he had been rewarded.

Ryder’s interviews with Keya had been edifying in the extreme. He’d learnt with joy that her tribe held Tom prisoner, even now he couldn’t help thinking that it was a pity that they hadn’t dispatched him.

Then those girls had turned up and had given him a great deal more information. They knew Tomasz, that had been clear, even if they were behaving as though they had only just met him. They knew him well from the accuracy of their information, and they also knew Dec. It seemed that they had lived in the same tribe as him and Tom.
The recordings had proved so interesting that he’d copied them from the computer. It had proven to be a wise precaution, as Ryder had erased them from the data banks a few hours later. Now they were his trump card.

On Tom’s arrival home he had gathered the council, with the exception of Tom and Ryder. His carefully worded explanation to the brothers had been nothing short of genius. He could hardly contain the smile that threatened to destroy his image of hesitant worry. The council had listened and, more importantly, they had believed his every word.

He had told them that he had stumbled over the recordings when updating the servers. It had taken him half the night to doctor the recordings into something suitably incriminating. However, it had been their deletion from the system, and Ryder’s pass code of authorisation, that had been the killing blow.

Jimmy revels in the irony that in deleting the files, presumably to keep them all safe, Ryder had destroyed the one piece of evidence that could have saved them.

And so here they were, in just a few moments Ryder and Tom would arrive. It was almost too sublime. Their trial had already been carried out, the second the recording had finished Jimmy had seen their sentence in the council’s eyes.

The door opens, and the guard brings Tom and Ryder into the hall. Jimmy smiles inwardly. They are nonchalant, not seeming to notice the cool atmosphere in the room. It’s clear that they have no idea of the catastrophe that hangs over them.

“Jimmy has found a breach in our security, if you’ll all take your seats we can begin.”

It’s Orin that speaks, his voice echoing around the hall. He gestures to where Jimmy stands, respectfully quiet against one of the arches. Tom looks surprised, and Jimmy reflects he probably hadn’t even noticed him when he came in.

For the first time in his life the idea that he had been invisible makes Jimmy laugh.

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Tom

Tom moves to take his place at the table, feeling strangely unsettled. He had felt something was wrong when the guard arrived at Wisteria House. Now, looking at the grim faces around the table, he knows that something has happened. He can feel the suspicion directed at Ryder and him thick in the air.

The lights begin to dim, and Tom knows that whatever it is that he’s about to see, the majority of the room has seen it already.

An image filled the screen at one end of the table.

“Though many should stumble, though all should fall, with you at my side, I will always stand tall. Where’s Tommy?” asks Ryder.

“We last saw him three days ago,” replies Jan.

“You know?” he continues.

“What have you done with Dec?” asks Deeta.

“Dec is fine, for now. You can see him later, after we have discussed some of the more important issues. I can be sure of your help?”

“With the accidents?” asks Jan. “That’s why Tom sent us.”

“Then we had better begin; follow me.”
The lights flicker on, revealing the guards standing behind Tom and Ryder’s chairs, obviously the plan from the beginning. What hadn’t been in the program is the gun that Tom holds steadily against Adin’s head.

“Drop it, Tom.” Orin’s voice is uncertain, his outstretched hand trembling slightly.
“Or what, you’ll shoot me?” queries Tom. “You’re going to do that anyway.”
“We can talk about this,” continues Orin. Tom laughs, and looks over his shoulder at the guard.
“Yeah; I can see that you had talking on your mind. Up you get, Adin. Adin stands, Tom’s hand on his shoulder, the gun still pressed firmly against his skull.
“Now the way I see it you have two options here: one, you shoot me dead. The down side of that plan is that Adin gets it as well. Two: you tell the guards to put down their weapons, and Rye and I, and the girls and Dec, leave the compound unharmed with Adin. We’ll send him back to you when we’re safe.”
“You’ll just kill him,” states Orin flatly.
“It’s a distinct possibility,” shrugs Tom. “But the other way it’s a certainty. I wouldn’t make the wrong choice; what would you tell his wife? Think about it Orin, how would you explain all this to Nina?”
Jimmy’s expression turns dismayed, and he steps forward, slamming both hands on the table.
“Don’t be fooled; he won’t kill him.”
“Now what would make you say that, Jimmy?” Tom’s voice is sarcastic. A flush of rage to spreads patchily over Jimmy’s face.
“Shoot him, he’s bluffing!” he splutters.
“Don’t be a fool, Jimmy, he’s killed enough of us hasn’t he? Why doubt him now?”
“You’re going to let him get away?” Jimmy’s incredulous voice rises in anger. Tom sees the full knowledge that he has given himself away for no reason, light Jimmy’s eyes with feverish horror.
“There’s no other way,” Blake interjects.
“You see, Jimmy, there’s no other way.” Tom’s voice is mocking. “Not when you’re dealing with murderous scum.”
“Drop your weapons.” The guards turn toward Orin at Ryder’s demand, obviously unsure what they should do.
“Do as he says.” It’s Cayden that reassures them, and they lower their guns to the floor.
“I’ll take that.” Ryder’s voice interrupts a guard mid motion, and with great reluctance the soldier releases the fire arm to him.
“Come on, Adin, time for us to go for a little walk.” Tom drags Adin with him towards the door, nodding to Ryder that he should lock the door behind them.
“The lock won’t hold them for long, Jayden will be able to hack it. We have to get to Wisteria House, Dec and the girls…”
“They’re waiting for us at the pavilion.”
“You knew?” Ryder’s voice is incredulous. “How —?”
“There’s no time for explanations. Find Adin’s key card, they’ll be able to trace it.”
They exit the hall and halt while Ryder frisks Adin, taking his card and throwing it into a nearby hedge.
“Are you going to kill me?” Adin’s voice is studiously calm.
“Don’t be such an idiot, Adin,” answers Tom, pushing him at a run down the path that leads to the park.
As they near the pavilion they see the girls, their sober grey and black camouflage stands out against the showy beauty of the pavilion starkly. Dec is walking on his hands on the grass in front of them.

“What’s happened?” asks Jan, eyeing the gun in Tom’s hand, and its proximity to Adin’s head, with misgiving.

“We know who it is.”

“What? Who?” I look again to the gun levelled at Adin’s head. “Or is that a silly question?”

“There isn’t any time to explain; we’ve got to get out of here,” states Ryder, his attention is suddenly caught by Tom’s movements. “What are you doing?”

Tom looks up from the handcuffs he’s securing around Adin’s wrists and the rail. “We have to leave him here, he’ll be safer.”

“Are you out of your mind? He’s our only chance of getting out of here alive!”

“This is the perfect situation for one of those ‘accidents’, Rye.” Tom takes Dec’s hand and begins to run. “You want that on your conscience, because I don’t.”

We run eastward toward the tower blocks at one end of the compound.

“Shall we be heading for the Great Hall?” asks Jan breathlessly.

“We won’t get through the guard,” answers Ryder. “We’ll have to use the escape route.”

We run until we are on the outskirts of the town, and then Tom’s pace slows to a walk. We pass apartment blocks and several crowded restaurants before turning down an alley.

“We’re here,” Tom’s voice holds a note of relief.

The building is about three stories high and highly decorative, its façade giving no clue to its use. We enter stealthily, Tom in the lead and Ryder bringing up the rear, and move along the short corridor towards the door at the far end. Tom opens it, stepping out on to the metal grating of the walkway.

“What is this place, Tom?” I whisper.

“Water works,” he replies. “When my father built this place, he incorporated an escape route in case the complex was captured by another tribe.”

As he is speaking, he leads us through the aerial walkways until we are on the floor of the building, surrounded by pipes and plant.

“He installed a pipe that runs in a straight line to the river.” He stops before one of the large round pipes and climbs up on top of it. “This pipe is filled with escape pods; it connects to another pipe which, when activated, is pressurised. When the pods are closed they’re pushed through a chamber that connects to the pressurised pipe, which then ejects them into the river.”

As he is speaking he turns the wheel and opens the hatch.

“At a squeeze it should take four.” He turns to help us as we climb up on to the top of the pipe. “Provided one of the four is Dec.”

“Then the girls and Dec should go first,” suggests Ryder.

Tom shakes his head.

“What about at the other end?” he asks. “You take Keya, Dec, and Jan. Deeta and I will take the next one.”

Ryder looks as though he will argue, but Tom pushes him firmly into the pod. Jan and Keya jump in after him, and Tom hands Dec down, closing the lid over them and waiting for the hiss as it seals.

“Push the red button, Deeta, it activates the pressurised pipe.”
Tom closes the hatch and waits expectantly for a few seconds until the pod disappears from sight before opening the hatch again. The roar of water assails my ears, and my eyes clash fearfully with Tom’s. He winks at me.

“It’s alright, Deeta.” His smile is reassuring. “The next pod will take a few seconds to come through, all you have to do is…” He looks up as though hearing something. I watch as his face takes on a wary cast and then he pulls me into his arms, turning me so that his body shields mine. I feel him lurch against me, and then hear his voice close to my ear.

“Don’t panic, Deeta, take a deep breath.” His voice is tense and stiff, and as he speaks I feel him falling backwards, pulling me with him. We fall through the hatch and in to the icy water, I can’t help a moan of surprise at the shock. We slide along, the water pushing us into the pressurised pipe, submerging us completely in an airless space.

The pressure is terrifying. Water swirls around us and for a moment I struggle against Tom’s hold in fear, and then cling to him tightly. The horrifying thought that this is it, my last moment, fills my mind.

Will this be it all ends?

I don’t know how long we remain submerged, or when we exit the pipe. To me it seems an eternity, and I feel myself losing consciousness. It’s Tom that pulls me to the surface of the river. He tows me to the bank, dragging me out of the water and on to the grass. I lay on my front, choking up water, conscious of Tom rhythmically rubbing my back.

“You okay, Deeta?”

“I think I swallowed half of the river, are we on the right bank?”

Tom nods his head. Of course we are; Tom would have made sure he headed for the right side of the river. He remains silent, kneeling beside me, his figure dark against the sky.

“We have to move, Deeta, we can’t stay here.”

“Where are the others?”

Tom takes my hand and pulls me upright.

“The pod would have carried them further down river.”

“How much further?”

“Let’s put it this way: by the time we reach where the pod landed, they would be long gone.”

“Then what do we do?”

“We go back to Marshall territory. Ryder and Keya don’t know a friendly tribe, and Jan only knows one. It’s the only place they can go.”

We walk north through the City, shivering as the winds fingers probe our sodden clothing. My teeth are chattering uncontrollably and I stumble. Tom’s arm shoots out to steady me, and he winces.

“What’s wrong? Are you alright?”

He doesn’t answer me, but keeps on walking. I pause remembering Tom pulling me into his arms and tensing against me before we fell through the hatch. My eyes search him and find the hole in his jacket were the bullet entered.

“It’s nothing.” Tom shakes his head, pulling away a little as I slide my hand inside his jacket. His shoulder is wet and sticky, and when I withdraw my hand, my fingers are red with his blood. I feel myself blanch.

I’ve been told that life is full of moments of revelation. At the ripe old age of twenty, I guess I’m not experienced enough to know if that’s true. However, this I do know: as I stand here beside Tom, realising that he took a bullet for me, I know
something that I didn’t know just a few short moments before. Jan is completely, unequivocally, and undeniably right: I am in love with Tom.

What could be more natural than for me to love someone as brave, courageous, and kind as the man he is? I also know that to some degree the feeling is reciprocated. It’s in his face as he looks down at me. He’s almost apologetic, and a regretful light gleams in his eyes. He takes my hand, pulling me after him. For some time I just follow him, dazed by my epiphany. It’s the feel of his blood sliding down my hand where it’s clasped in his that brings me back to the moment, and the grave reality of our situation.

“We should look at your arm, Tom.”
His grip on my hand tightens and he shakes his head.
“We have to get further away from the river.”
“But, Tom, there’s so much blood!” My voice, coming out high pitched, cracks feebly on the last word.
“There isn’t as much as you think, it’s just that I’m soaking as well.”
Perhaps he feels the resistance in my lagging steps, because he pulls me on.
“Come on, Deeta. Don’t fight me along with everyone else!”
His hand is holding mine so tightly that mine has become numb. His breathing is slow and regular, apart from the way he’s holding his arm he doesn’t look hurt. I decide that Tom knows best and speed up.
“How long will it take to get into Marshall territory, Tom?”
“A few hours.” Tom looks up at the sky. “We should be there before dark.”
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Orin

“Adin, have you gone completely mad?” asks Jayden.
“No, it’s just —”
“They tried to kill you!” continues Jeshua.
“Maybe they didn’t…”
“What do you mean?” asks Orin sharply.
“I’m just saying —”
“Yes, I know what you’re just saying! Tom held a gun to your head and you’re saying maybe we’re jumping to the wrong conclusion?”
“We had guns at their heads! Does that make us murdering psychopaths too?” asks Adin in exasperation.
“But, Adin, you saw the recording…” begins Jayden.
“I know, I know.” Adin throws himself into a chair. “Nothing would have been easier than putting a bullet in me. They didn’t, in fact…”
“In fact?” prompts Dagny.
“I just don’t think any of this adds up,” he shrugs.
“Mr. Orin?” The unfortunate lackey receives the peeved attention of the gathered men.
“What is it?” asks Orin.
“Lady Mari is here, she wishes an audience with the council.”
“Better let her in, Orin.” Is Cayden’s advice.
“Bring her in, Lester.”
There is a moment’s silence as the assembled half-brothers wait for Mari’s entry.
“This isn’t the best time, Mari.” Is Orin’s greeting.
“I know, that’s why I’m here.” Mari’s face is worried and pale. “I’ve heard a rumour that Tom and Ryder are in some sort of trouble?”
“That’s no rumour, Mari, Tom and Ryder are responsible for the deaths of many, including Dax.”
“Who told you such a lie?” asks Mari, horrified. “They were just boys at the time.”
“It isn’t a lie, Mari, and we have proof that it isn’t,” answers Orin.
“How could you possibly have proof for a lie?” returns Mari angrily.
“They abducted Dec, Mari,” interjects Blake.
“Another lie!” announces Mari.
“What do you mean?”
“Who told you Tom and Ryder kidnapped Dec?” counters Mari.
“They told us themselves.”
Orin presses a button and the recording begins to play, Mari watches it in silence.
“You see, Mari? I’m sorry but it’s the truth,” Orin’s voice is soft.
“Tomasz was the only one of his brothers that Dax trusted fully; he trusted him with everything.” Mari’s eyes are softly unfocused, but they sharpen as they fall on Orin. “You wouldn’t know the truth if it jumped up and bit you on the backside! Who gave you that tape?”

“Jimmy Brook—”

“Jimmy?” Mari’s voice is incredulous, and she slides into the seat she is standing next to. “Jimmy?”

“Yes, he found —”

“Orin! You have to send someone to find him, to fetch him here… quickly before it’s too late!”

“Calm down, Mari, why —”

“Orin, it’s him!” Mari is almost hysterical. “It’s him! He killed Dax, and Roland, and Rothe — all of them!”

“Mari, get a hold on yourself, you don’t know what you’re saying,” reprimands Orin.

“You don’t understand!” Mari tries to quell the shuddering breaths that rack her small frame. “Dax sent Dec to live with Tom. He was afraid that if he didn’t Dec would die, he was so fragile and vulnerable. Dax said keeping him was like signing his death warrant ourselves. He said the only way of keeping him safe was to send him away with Tom. We couldn’t tell the council for fear that we would tell the very person who wanted to kill him!”

As Mari finishes, her breathless sobbing is the only sound that can be heard in the silent room.

“You knew? All the time you knew and you never told us that Dax’s son was safe?” Val’s voice is soft.

“How could I? I hardly believed it was true at first. After Roland died and Dax insisted that it wasn’t an accident; I didn’t believe him, I thought that it was the grief talking. Then Rehu died, and Dax got scared and sent Dec away.” Mari’s voice wobbles, and tears course down her face. “And then Dax… how could I not believe then? How could I trust any of you when I found it impossible to mistrust one of you?”

“You called, Mr. Orin?” Lester re-enters the room.

“I called you.” It’s Adin that answers. “Take a patrol and have Jim Brook brought here at once.”

Lester leaves the room looking slightly bemused, and the brothers assembled all turn to Adin.

“That recording could easily have been altered, to say that the moon was cheese if that was what Jimmy wanted it to say.” Adin spreads out his hands. “I need a heck of a lot more than that to give my own brother a death sentence!”

“Ryder destroyed the recordings,” points out Jeshua.

“He had to; they showed that Deeta, Jan, and Tom were from the tribe that had Dec,” explains Mari. “Ryder couldn’t have the killer knowing that Dec had been with Tom the whole time and twisting the facts to incriminate him.”

“But Jimmy did see and do just that,” Val mutters, sinking his head into his hands. “And we believed him!” Jayden groans.

“Jimmy seemed pretty sure that Tom wouldn’t kill Adin,” Val remarks slowly. “If Tom and Ryder were trying to kill us one by one, Adin would be dead.”

“So would Dec,” Mari’s voice is husky.

There is a small disturbance at the door and Lester walks in.

“Excuse me, sir, but we can’t seem to find Jimmy.”
“What do you mean?”
“The records show that he left the compound fifteen minutes ago, sir.”
“He knew we were on to him!” Val’s fist crashes on to the table in exasperation.
“No, wait; how could he?” asks Cayden. “Tom and Rye didn’t exactly protest innocence, in fact quite the reverse.”
“If Jimmy didn’t expect us to twig what was happening, why leave? He could have done a lot more harm if he had stayed,” Blake reasons.
“And where is he going anyway?” asks Jeshua.
“I don’t know; but I’d bet a packet that something’s going to happen. Something not good,” answers Adin.
“Then we should make preparation, forewarned is forearmed,” states Orin. “We’ll put the guard on high alert.”
“I think it’s going to need a bit more than that,” Adin’s voice is serious.
“You don’t think… not a bomb?” Val whispers in horror.
Adin shakes his head slowly.
“What if…” He pauses before beginning again. “Jimmy’s father was a Lewis.”
“What are you saying?” asks Dagny.
“That he has no reason to kill us; he has no position on the board that can be strengthened with us out of the way.” Adin’s voice is slow and calm. “That means he needs help, and the Lewises would be only too willing to offer their services.”

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Jimmy

Jimmy leans against the wall trying to get his breath back. Who was it that had said revenge was sweet? They had seriously understated the matter! This feeling of elation and power, the gratification of seeing his plans fall into place after so many years, was so much more than sweet.

All those years of sucking up to the council and being slighted by everyone. Of being used by everyone as a means to get close to the brothers; his brothers! He wonders vaguely how he has stood it for so long.

Paul Andak had tolerated the son of his third wife’s first marriage, realising that Jimmy was part of the deal. He had been brought up with Paul Andak’s sons, but he was not one of them.
He had no place in Paul’s kingdom.
He was no heir, and yet he wasn’t a subject either. He was… a complication.
His appeal to others had been that he was, in a way, close to the brothers. He had been around them so much that they accepted his presence, hardly even noticing he was there. It had been his strength and their weakness.

He knew everything that had happened, the decisions the council made. He’d seen tribal issues discussed, but he had been allowed no say in them. The brothers had treated him with a certain amount of familiarity, but at the same time he had been their lackey.

He hated them for it.

He despised all they stood for, yet all the while he had coveted their position and all they had. For years he had bided his time, scheming to take everything from them. Now finally here was the opportunity. With Tom and Ryder framed and the brothers divided, they were at their most vulnerable.

He had contacted the Lewis tribe and had told them to prepare for attack. By the time he reached his father’s tribe, all would be ready.
He had no illusions about the Lewises. They’d been fighting the Andak since the breakdown and coveted the Andak’s power the same as he did. When he had gone to them with his proposition they had promised all he asked.

They’d promised too much.

He was sure that they had no intention of honouring their side of the bargain. They’d probably decided to kill him, but he was prepared for that. He knew how easy it was to eliminate a mark in the heat of battle when no one would see. All he would have to do was wait until the Andak were almost defeated, then he would take out the joint chiefs of the Lewis tribe, along with any Andak brothers that might still be alive.

He would reign over two tribes and two cities, from there who knew? Jimmy smiles to himself; maybe he would take over the world!

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Deeta

We enter the outer reaches of Marshall territory at dusk. Long ago I ceased to be anything but numbed to the aching coldness that envelops my body. Tom’s arm around my shoulder and my left side down to my waist, shares his warmth.

There is nothing about Marshall territory that I recognise. Most of the buildings have been reduced to rubble, and the general surroundings have the appearance of a war zone. In the distance I see the compound, its blackened walls only just discernable in the half light.

Tom says we’re headed to war. He says that now he knows that Jimmy is behind everything, he has a pretty good idea of what will happen next. Not that Tom has spoken much. All through our journey he has been preoccupied and silent, a grim frown darkening his features.

“You look worried, Tom.”

For a moment he is quiet, staring at the ground.

“I’d be a fool if I wasn’t worried, Deeta.”

“Will it be that bad?”

“When this ends, if we don’t win, the Lewises will destroy every tribe in the City. They will kill anyone that tries to stop them.”

For a moment we walk on in silence.

“How likely is it that they’ll win?”

“If we’re to have a chance, just a chance, we’ll need the help of every tribe.” Tom turns to me suddenly. “They don’t care, Deeta! They just don’t care how many people are killed in their pursuit of power, they only care about winning. How do you fight someone who would willingly sacrifice a thousand men to kill one of their enemies?”

I’ve never seen Tom like this before, never thought that it was possible for him to be so riled.

“I’m scared,” I admit nervously.

“There’s nothing wrong with fear, Deeta, it’s healthy. You’ll find that the fearless are fools who never live long. If you have no fear, how can you have courage and bravery?”

We walk in silence for a while. It has never occurred to me before that we might not succeed. Surely we won’t lose this battle that’s been forced upon us? Good always triumphs over evil… doesn’t it?
As we get closer to the Marshall compound I see the figures on guard in the entry way. One of the guards straightens and runs to meet us. I fall into Nella’s arms.

“Deeta!” Her eyes are brimful of tears, and we clasp each other wordlessly for a moment. “Heck, Deet, you’re sodden!”

“So’s Tom, and he’s been shot. We need to get him inside and seen to; he wouldn’t even stop long enough for me to bind the wound.”

“Has Jan, Keya, and Dec arrived yet?” asks Tom.

“They’ve been here for half an hour.”

Tom’s large frame relaxes on to my shoulder.

“Quick, Nell; get the other side of him, we have to get him inside.”

We lurch into the building under his weight, and Jan cannons into my arms, tears streaming down her face.

“Deet! Thank goodness!”

“It’s okay, Janny, don’t cry.”

Tom is still leaning on me, but with my free hand I smooth the hair back from her face. I look over at Ryder questioningly.

“We weren’t sure if you made it out; we never saw a pod,” he explains.

“We didn’t use one.” Tom laughs softly. A film of moisture covers his flushed features. Ryder’s face registers shock and he comes over to take Nella’s place at Tom’s side.

“Jan? Janny, listen to me! I need a first aid kit —”

Jan pulls away from me, looking over me anxiously.

“If those swine’s have hurt you —”

“Not me, Janny,” I interject swiftly. “Tom’s hit. Now quick get me the first aid box.”

“No worries, Deeta, I’ve got it here.” Nella hands me the box. “Do you need to dig anything out?”

“No, it’s a clean wound; the bullet passed straight through.”

I reach up and place my hand on Tom’s forehead, feeling him lean into the coolness of my fingers with a sigh.

“Heck, Tom, you’re burning up! Janny; go and find Tom something dry to put on… be quick!”

I begin to propel Tom towards the stairs and then check. His weight on my shoulder is gradually increasing, and I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to keep him upright on my own.

“Rye, can you help me? He’s so heavy! Robin, can we still heat water?”

Robin nods his head in affirmation.

“Can we manage a bath full?”

“I’ll see to it.”

It’s Ryder who manages to get Tom up the stairs and into the bedroom. His weight on my shoulder is gradually increasing, and I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to keep him upright on my own.

“Rye, can you help me? He’s so heavy! Robin, can we still heat water?”

Robin nods his head in affirmation.

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“I’ll see to it.”

It’s Ryder who manages to get Tom up the stairs and into the bedroom, without him we would probably have ended a heap at the bottom of the staircase. We stagger into the nearest bedroom, and sit Tom on the edge of the bed. His breathing is laboured, and his eyes is bloodshot. I manoeuvre his right arm out of his leather jacket, and then carefully ease it over his left arm and shoulder. The dark blue crew neck jumper that he’s wearing will not be so easy.

“I’d cut it off if I were you.”

Ryder pulls a knife from his belt and hands it to me. With the sodden jumper discarded, it’s easy to get rid of the shirt and tee shirt Tom is wearing underneath.

The wound is ugly, the surrounding skin red and hot, but thankfully the bleeding is sluggish. I wash it carefully, watching his face for any sign of pain. He doesn’t flinch,
just sits with his eyes closed and his head bent. When I have finished bandaging his shoulder, Robin knocks at the door. He and several other men have brought the hot water up. They walk through the bedroom and I hear them emptying the contents of their containers into the bath.

“Hadn’t you better…” Ryder signals to the door and I flush.

“Oh… yes… I’d better change before I catch a chill.”

I move to the door, aware of the amusement in Ryder’s eyes and wanting to get as far away from it as possible.

“Deeta?” Tom’s slurred voice calls to me as I reach for the door handle. “Thanks, Deeta.”

I smile at him before leaving the room.

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Ryder

Ryder bends down to undo Tom’s boots.

“So; you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“With what?”

“You and Deeta; what’s the deal?”

Tom laughs faintly.

“You always were a cad, Rye. Only you would wait until I’m in high fever to give me a mini inquisition!”

“That’s not an answer, Tommy.”

Tom remains silent for a minute.

“Help me to the bathroom, I won’t need your services after that, and then I’ll tell you about it.”

“Sounds fair.”

It’s a few minutes later when Ryder, sitting with his back against the door jamb and staring out into the bedroom, calls through to Tom, reminding him of their bargain.

“What do you want to know?”

“I just can’t figure it out; you give her the locket and go around being some kind of hero to her. Dec tells me that she looks after you and all your brats; and yet you do nothing about it. What’s the game?”

“No game, no deal, no nothing.”

“Yeah, right; you’re just friends.” Ryder allows a large helping of scepticism to colour his voice.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I understand that she risked her life to keep you safe, Tom.”

“Deeta would risk her life for anyone she thought needed help, it isn’t personal.”

Tom’s voice becomes bitter. “That’s a novel idea isn’t it? Can you imagine Nova risking her pretty neck for anything, except perhaps power?”

“But we weren’t talking of just anyone, we were talking of you.”

“What do you want me to say, Rye? That I like the girl? I do, if things were different I’d marry her.”

“If what was different?”

“You just don’t stop, do you?” Tom sounds incredulous.

“I’ve been told I resemble a stuck record before now,” reminisces Ryder with a smile.

“Too right! If I wasn’t Andak, I guess.”

“Sounds like a get out to me.”
“Maybe, but I can’t take the chance that she’ll get hurt.”
“By who?”
“Me I suppose.” Tom pauses. “You know how they’ll treat her, and I won’t always
be around. What if I can’t protect her from them?”
“She can take care of herself. Trust me; I’ve seen her,” assures Ryder.
“But what if she can’t?” Tom’s voice is quiet, giving Ryder pauses thoughtfully.
He had imagined that Tom had some plan; that he wanted Deeta, but he wanted her
on his own terms. He’d never even considered that it might be like this; that Tom
loved her too much to risk taking her to a place where she might be unhappy. Or
worse, where she might be forced to metamorphosis into something different,
something commonplace in their world, and something that Tom had no tender
feelings for. If he had wanted a woman like that, Nova would gladly have filled the
position for him.
Ryder knew better than anyone the disdain in which Tom held the women of their
tribe. Ryder found their blatant hunger for power, and their willingness to use their
charms as a means to an end, amusing in a pathetic sort of way. Tom was different: he
hated their calculation and manipulation. He despised them for their willingness to
sell themselves to the highest bidder, all in pursuit of power. The man that came with
that power could be a raving lunatic, and they wouldn’t care.
Ryder hadn’t known Deeta for very long, but a few things were abundantly clear
about her. She was loyal to the point of putting herself in danger for others. She was
courageous in the face of her fears, and all without any expectation of gain of any
sort.
She was so impossibly naive, pure and untainted by the world they lived in. She was
so kind that Ryder hadn’t been able to believe she was real. He’d thought it had all
been an act, had never even considered that she might actually be everything she
seemed to be.
Nothing could have been more attractive to Tom. Ryder suspected that even in her
own world she was unique in her lack of selfishness.
Tom appears in the doorway, dressed in the clothes that Robin brought up. He
staggers across to the bed, casting himself full length across its softness.
“I’ve thought about it, Rye; ever since she was fourteen, and I realised it was
changing between us. I tried to think of a way that it could happen. I’ve had six years
to think about it, and it always comes back to one thing: what if she can’t handle it?”
“She could —”
“But what if she can’t?”
Ryder found himself silenced by Tom’s words and the look of resignation on his
younger brother’s face.
“Exactly: I can’t risk it.” His weary voice is roughened with emotion. “Besides; we
have more important things to talk about.”
“Jimmy,” states Ryder.
“Jimmy.” Tom’s eyes are closed, dark smudges stark against the paleness of his
face. “I never thought of Jimmy.”
“No one did, that’s why he managed to stay alive for so long.” Ryder’s voice is,
even now, disdainful. “He won’t live for much longer.”
Tom moves his head restlessly on the pillow and tries to get up.
“We need to move quickly.”
“What do you mean?” Ryder’s voice is sharp, his out stretched arms hold Tom to the
bed. “You have to rest, Tommy.”
“Rye, you’re a tactician; think about it. In Jimmy’s place what would you do?”
“Come on; we’re talking about Jimmy!”
“Yes, that’s right! You have to stop thinking about him as a nonentity! He’s clever. A clever man would know that now is the time to attack, while we’re in disarray and unsure. I’d bet anything you like that he’s back with his father’s tribe even now, mobilizing Lewis troops against us.”
“You don’t think…”
“Yes I do, I’m positive; and at the moment their chances are better than ours.”
“We have to activate the sleepers.”
“It should be our first move,” agrees Tom. “We haven’t a chance if we can’t get the other tribes on our side, but we also need our tribe on our side.”
“And how are you proposing to do that?”
“Mari will have explained that Dax sent Dec to be with me and that I didn’t kidnap him. That will cast some doubt on our guilt.” Tom moves restlessly. “And Jimmy will know that he has to strike fast; he’s probably left the compound already. When the council finds out he’s gone, putting two and two together will come easier than you’d think.”
“What makes you think that they’ll suspect him? He could make up a reasonable excuse to leave the compound.”
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“Tommy?”
Ryder leans forward over Tom’s still figure to find him fast asleep. He straightens, shaking his head, a wistful smile on his lips.
“You’re unbelievable, Tommy... but I envy you your assurance.”
He leaves his brother to the oblivion of sleep, careful to make no sound as he leaves the room.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ryder

“How’s Tommy?” Ryder blinks rapidly, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness of the hallway as Jan peels herself from the wall. “Sleeping, he says he’s fine.” “And what do you say?” “That there’s not much point in trying to disagree with him.” Ryder grins. “What about Deeta?” “She’s sleeping; we aren’t used to excitement like you and Tom. It takes a lot out of us.” She begins to move down the hall, matching her pace with his. “What do we do now?” “The only thing we can do; we get ready for war.” “Is that all you know how to do?” asks Jan bitterly. “Fight and destroy things?” Ryder’s hand encircles her upper arm, bringing her round to face him. They come to an abrupt halt in the corridor. “What do you mean by that?” “Who was in charge of the rescue mission mounted to find Dec?” “I was.” “You were.” Jan closes her eyes as tears spill over her lashes. “You were in charge of the mission where Deeta was badly beaten and left unconscious.” Her eyes open, and she pulls away from his slackened grip. “Who was in charge of the attack on the Marshall compound when we sought refuge here?” “I was.” “You were. Look around you, Ryder; look at what you’ve accomplished. You destroyed this place. How did you suppose that this tribe would survive after you had brought them to this? Did you even care?” Ryder is quiet for a while, staring into the depths of her eyes. “I thought that your tribe was holding Tommy —” “That’s what you thought,” agrees Jan. “But what was the reality of the situation? The truth was that Tommy was living with us of his own free will. Sometimes what you think you know, and what you actually know are two wildly different things.” “What do you want me to say, Jan?” asks Ryder quietly. “That I was wrong? I was; but if you were in my position and were told that Deeta had been captured by another tribe, was being held as their prisoner, how would you have felt? What would you have done when they started threatening her life?” Jan shakes her head miserably and refuses to look at him. “Do you think that I want this? That I want to fight out there, in the cold and desolate wastes of this city, for my life and the survival of my tribe? I don’t. For one
thing I’m scared to death that I’ll lose yet more of my brothers and nephews. Yet the thing that worries me the most is that I’ll lose you no matter what I do.”
  Jan turns her head sharply to look up at him from turbulent, stormy eyes.
  “How do you know you ever had me?”
  “Not know; thought. But like you said; what I think I know and the truth sometimes differ wildly.”
  Jan doesn’t resist the pressure of his arm pulling her towards him, nor does she struggle as his free hand pushes her chin up.
  “So; let’s find out for sure, shall we?”
  She doesn’t try to break from his hold; if anything she leans into his embrace. For a considerable while there is no sound in the hallway.
  “and just what did that prove?” asks Jan as, their kiss ended, they stand close together.
  Ryder smiles slightly, impressed by her ability to remain aloof after such an intimate moment. Warmth floods his veins, making him feel uncharacteristically sentimental and happy. He experiences an odd urge to dwell on the beauty of Jan’s spirit, and the unquenchable fire of her courage.
  Damn, but he had it bad.
  Woman had never been anything more than a momentary distraction for him; interchangeable, and annoying in large doses.
  Jan was different. She intrigued him. He could spend hours in her company without noticing the passage of time. She stood up to him, laughed at him, didn’t spend every moment in his company trying to seduce him or get something from him.
  She toyed with him; gliding effortlessly between mocking flirtation and chummy friendship with enough speed to give him whiplash. She kept him on the edge of his seat. She knew who she was, and she had no intention of toning her personality down in an effort to be more acceptable to him.
  She was a priceless gem that he had never truly believed to exist, and she was grossly mistaken if she thought he would ever let her go.
  “It proved a heck of a lot to me, Janny.” Ryder trails his fingers along her jaw line.
  “Tell me that you won’t fight me anymore.”
  “There wouldn’t be much point; you always win.”
  Her words are jarring and Ryder releases her, pushing her away from him firmly. He understands Tom a little better suddenly. Ryder had always believed in getting his own way, regardless of the cost. Yet he found that he didn’t want to force Jan into doing anything she didn’t want to do. Over the distance which separates them Janny’s surprised, questioning eyes meet his.
  “That’s not good enough, Jan,” he states quietly. “I’ve told you how I feel, but I don’t want a wife that doesn’t come a hundred percent certain and willing. If you can’t give me that, then I don’t want anything from you.”
  “Querida? There you are! Robin would like to talk to your friend, Jan.” Catalina, unconscious of the scene she has interrupted, smiles pleasantly at them both. “He invites you to eat with us.”
  Ryder remains perfectly still, looking down at Jan as though no interruption has occurred.
  “Great!” Jan’s voice is a little too eager. “I’m famished, aren’t you, Ryder?”
  “Jan and I have something to finish first, but we’ll be down presently, thank you.”
  “Please, Rye, it can wait until later. We can talk later, can’t we?”
  “No, it cannot wait; but if you’re hungry we’ll continue this conversation over dinner.”
“With everyone listening?” gasps Jan.
“‘It’s not what I’d have chosen, I grant you, but if that’s the way you want it…”
He begins to walk down the hallway towards the stairs, quickly pursued by Jan.
“We’ll be down in a minute, Kate.”
Catalina excuses herself with a knowing smile, and the hallway is quiet as Jan fidgets uncomfortably.
“Do I have to say it out loud?” she asks eventually, blushing a delicate shade of pink in embarrassment.
Relief floods through his brain and he reaches out, taking her hand in his and pulling her towards him gently. He had only meant to embrace her, but Jan says the three words whose assurance he had needed, and somehow they’re kissing again.
It is some time later that they descend the stairs together, in search of Robin and nourishment.
“By the by, Jan.” Ryder stretches his arm across her shoulders. “In response to your earlier question; no, fighting and destroying things are not my only talents. Remind me to show you some time.”
“I thought you just did?”
“Oh, you’ve seen nothing yet.”

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Deeta

“Ryder said you’d be leaving this morning.”
Tom doesn’t turn at the sound of my voice, but continues to tie his boot laces.
“How are you feeling? I came to see if you needed me to re-bandage your shoulder?”
He straightens and turns around to face me, tucking a gun into his belt.
“Ryder’s already done it.” He pulls his jacket on. “What about you, are you alright?”
“Fine; I’m tougher than I look!” I shift my weight awkwardly. “You’re going back to Andak City aren’t you?”
“No: we’re going back to Andak City. The Andak are better equipped and we have the infrastructure to organise a defence.”
“So there’s definitely going to be more fighting?”
“I’m sorry, Deeta; if there was another way I’d be the first to try it. We’re dealing with the Lewises: they know no other way.”
We enter the great hall to find Robin conversing pleasantly with Ryder, they both break off as they see Tom coming.
“I always seem to be saying goodbye to you, Tom.”
“Not this time, Rob, is there somewhere we can talk?”
“Right here if you’d like, what’s wrong?”
“First of all we need to get a few things straight —”
Robin holds up a hand, stemming the flow of Tom’s words.
“Its okay, Tom, we sorted that out last time you were here. Andak is your name, it isn’t who you are.”
“Thanks, Rob, I’m grateful, I wish it were that. Ryder was the man in charge of the attack on your compound.”
Robin’s face whitens, and Ryder’s eyes narrow in on Tom.
“Is this true?” asks Robin hoarsely.
“Every word,” replies Ryder.
“I needed to tell you that, to be up front with you in case later you heard it from a
different source. You have a right to know and base your decision on all of the facts.”
“What decision?” asks Robin sharply.
“There’s going to be a battle,” answers Tom. “Not a fight or a skirmish, but a battle.
Did you think that we were the only ones to survive, that the people of this city were
the only ones left? We’re not. There is a tribe from a nearby town, the Lewises, and
they want control of this city. The Andak have always stood in their way, but at the
moment we are weak and unprepared for attack. We can’t do this by ourselves, Robin;
we need the help of every tribe to make a stand. We all have to work together if any
of us are to survive.”
“You’re asking for my help?” asks Robin. “You destroy my tribe, and then ask me
to help you?”
“I’m asking you to help yourself. The Lewises aren’t a friendly bunch; they’ll kill
you on principal when they absorb your tribe into their own so that there won’t be any
lingering loyalty to the previous leader. My tribe can help you to rebuild this place,
help you to get back on your feet, but we can’t do that if the Lewises have wiped us
all out.”
For a moment there is silence.
“I have nothing but your word, Tom. How do I know that these people don’t just
want to destroy your tribe?”
“My word used to be good enough, we were friends once.”
Robin silently considers Tom, a thoughtful expression etched on his face.
“Jay, round every one up, it seems we’re leaving.”
Tom lets out a breath and smiles.
“Thanks, Rob.”
“It’s nothing.” Shrugs Robin. “I’ve known you a long time and you’ve never lied to
me, whatever you might have left out. Why would you start now?”
“Because I’m up to my neck in trouble and need help?”
“Not your style, mate.”
--------
Jimmy
Jimmy leans back into the seat of the truck. It was so close now, his victory, his
vindication. Soon the Andak tribe would be a mere blip on the chart of life. They
hadn’t a hope, no chance; they were unprepared for anything and everything. He hugs
the rifle closer to him, caressing it gently.
The Lewises had given him his orders; predictably they had placed him on the front
line. He wonders if they really expect him to obey the order, or if they know that he
will spend the fight somewhere safer. Even if they do suspect they could hardly have
guessed his plan. He and his rifle would be stationed on one of the derelict buildings
where he’d have a good view of the conflict. Once the battle was won, it would be
easy to pick off any of the remaining Andak brothers, and the Lewis joint chiefs. He’d
enough allies in both tribes to make his bid for control successful, and those that
opposed him… well, accidents happened, he’d proved that already.
His thoughts drift to Nova, to the power that he will hold over her. The truck lurches
on the rough terrain smacking his head against the door. For a blinding second all he
can see is stars.
“I’d put your helmet on if I were you, Dorothy. We’ve got a way to go, and the road will only get worse. There’ll be plenty of time to get your brains bashed out, no use in starting before we get to the party.”

The driver laughs and Jimmy smiles thinly in response, disliking him more with every passing moment. Ever since he had entered the cab he’d had to put up with the brash familiarity of the man, along with the jovial insults that fell from his lips with astonishing frequency. A sudden thought strikes him.

“What’s your name?”

“I go by Linus, can’t give you any more than that. Caught an Andak size eleven to the head a few years ago, and can’t remember a thing that happened before the headache I woke up with. That’s why I always wear this.” Linus grins, and raps the knuckles of his free hand against his helmet. “You listen to uncle Linus and protect your brain box, little brain though it may safeguard.”

Jimmy smiles weakly again and leans his head back against the head rest. Closing his eyes he occupies himself with imagining what future punishment to visit on the unfortunate Linus.

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Deeta

“Looks pretty quiet.” Ryder pulls back into the cover of the wall he is looking around.

“That’s the way it looks,” answers Tom. “I don’t like it.”

The Andak compound sits in the middle of a vast clearing, a no man’s land of emptiness.

“So, what do you want to do?” Ryder asks, his eyes firmly fixed on Tom’s averted face.

“You stay here. If we turn up with this lot they’ll think we’re an advanced scout; I’ll go and see what sort of reception we’re going to get.”

“Tom, wait!” I make a grab for his arm. “What if they shoot?”

“At this distance they’ll probably miss,” answers Tom with a shrug.

“Probably… what if they don’t?” Incredulity makes my voice more nagging than I’d intended.

“It’s too far for them to shoot with any kind of accuracy, don’t worry.”

He moves off from behind the building and the shelter it affords, his pace measured and slow.

“El hombre de secretos es loco!” Catalina remarks to Robin.

“Or brilliant, they say it’s a fine line,” answers Robin.

We continue to watch Tom’s progress in silence, our tension mounting as he nears the walls of the compound. Finally he pauses, still some way from the fortified entrance, and there is a slight disturbance as the great doors open slowly. A guard of several men come out to meet Tom. I’m afraid of what I might see and turn my face into the wall, waiting in agony for the sound of gunshots. For an eternity I stand there waiting, but no sound breaks the silence.

“That’s the signal, we’re okay to go.”

Ryder’s voice makes me jump.

“You mean… they’re on our side?” I ask.

“Yep. They’re on our side, we’re on their side; we could start a mutual appreciation society.” I can’t help thinking that his reply contains more flippancy than seems entirely fitting.
“Are you sure about that?” asks Robin. “This isn’t some reverse Trojan horse thing going on here?”

Ryder stares at him blankly for a moment.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, mate.”

“In the Iliad, these Greeks built a wooden horse —” begins Robin.

Ryder cuts him off.

“Tom wouldn’t signal for us if he wasn’t completely certain, and Tom is never wrong about these things.” He begins to walk towards the compound. “And, just for the record, the Iliad dealt with the last few weeks of the Trojan war, ending with the death of Hector. The events of the first nine years, the reason for the war, and the death of Achilles are all detailed in the epic cycle poems. Our Greek teacher made us study the original Greek text. Believe me; the whole thing is seared in my memory in words of fire.”

It takes me a while to assimilate this new information, and I start to realise that there is so much that I don’t know about Ryder and Tom. Before I can pursue the matter any further we arrive outside the compound. One of the men in khaki is Val; he’s conversing earnestly with Tom and gesturing to the skyline.

“Val says that they’ve picked up the Lewises on the move and headed in from the east. They’re about two hours away.”

“Two hours?” Ryder stares into the distance. “Then we’ve lost already; we can’t get the other tribes to agree and be here in two hours, there’s no time!”

“Most of them have already agreed,” interjects Val. “We activated the sleepers last night, and then sent a member of the council to each tribe to tell them what’s about to happen. It took a while, but we managed to make them realise that this place is their only hope of survival. Six are already here, twelve are on the way, and we expect to hear from the rest in the next fifteen minutes.”

“Well I hope you didn’t send anyone to the Marshalls, because we decided to crash the party,” says Robin, stepping forward. There is a general cheer from the crowd behind him.

“We weren’t sure what to do about your tribe. We didn’t think you’d appreciate another… visit… so soon.”

We enter the compound to find that its outer façade of calm hides a bustling frenzy of activity.

“Who’s here so far?” asks Ryder.

“Uncle Tom!”

The high pitched screech causes everyone to pause momentarily, plunging the room into stillness.

“Ricky, look; there’s Uncle Tom!”

Carris pushes her way through the crowd and casts herself into Tom’s arms. Val watches in amazement as Roydon, Ricky, Tarri, and Carris surround Tom, plying him with questions and talking excitedly all at once.

“Where have you been, Uncle Tom?” asks Carris as Tom swings Tarri up into his arms.

“Who cares where he’s been? I’ve been in prison!”

“Dec!”

Dec disappears beneath their frenzied rush and they fall to the floor in a pretty good imitation of a rugby scrum.

“Oh good, you found Dec, Uncle Tom.” Tarri snuggles her head against Toms shoulder, her hand playing with his hair.

“Where’s Uncle Jep, Tarri?”
“Just here my boy.” Uncle Jep disentangles himself from the crowd, and Dec throws himself joyfully into the old man’s arms. Tom’s embrace is a little more sedate.

“It’s good to see you, Uncle Jep.” Tom’s voice is a little unsteady.

“It’s good to see you also, Tom,” smiles Uncle Jep. “What have you been doing since I saw you last?”

“We’ve been having an adventure, Uncle Jep,” cries Dec. “Uncle Tom handcuffed a man to the railings!”

“No way!” gasps Roydon.

“Yes way and…” Dec blushes and lowers his voice. “And we have three sisters that we didn’t know anything about!”

“I don’t think… “ Ricky hesitates, looking to Tom for guidance. “Does he mean his family here, Uncle Tom?”

Tom nods and turns to Val.

“Where are Mari and the girls?”

“All the women and children are in the pavilion,” replies Val. “All but those who have any training.”

“Uncle Jep, it would be best if you took the children to the safety of the pavilion. The rest of us should get kitted up and briefed.”

“Orin wants to see you and Ryder before you kit up,” breaks in Val.

Tom relinquishes Tarri to Ricky, and Ryder begins to follow Val through the crowd towards the operations room.

“I’ve got to go, Uncle Jep.” For a moment Tom grasps the old man’s hand tightly.

“I’ll see you later.”

He strides into the crowd, and after a moment he’s lost to our view.

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Tom

“So; are you going to try and shoot us again, Val?” asks Ryder pleasantly.

“Not if you’re a good boy.” Val continues walking at a measured pace and doesn’t turn to Ryder as he speaks.

“What does Orin want?” asks Tom.

“Your input on the operation. You know how strong the Lewises are; they’re prepared for this, we’re not.”

They enter the operations room. Orin is stationed with his back to the door, leaning over a computerized map of the City.

“Tom and Rye are here, Orin.”

Val walks around the table and sits in a chair on the other side. A hush falls on to the room as all the brothers stand tense and uncertain.

“Thanks for ‘cuffing me to that rail.” Adin strolls forwards. “It took these geniuses forty five flippin’ minutes to find me!” His smile is friendly as he gestures for them to take their chairs. “We’re just finalising the plan of action that we intend to put before the tribal councils.”

Tom takes his cue.

“What have you come up with?”

“We intend to divide the tribes under their own generals,” begins Orin, a note of relief in his voice.

Suddenly Tom knows that this is how it will be, that the circumstances that arose last time they were all present in this room, will be tactfully ignored by all. It will never to be alluded to, but be treated as though it never happened.
“They will all be connected via radio to a centralised command point here within the compound; every tribe will have a controller here, and their orders will be given through them.”

“What orders?” asks Ryder.

“That’s what we’re having trouble agreeing on.” Orin places his finger on the map.

“The Lewises are here, and their current trajectory will bring them down this route here. It’s the only road that remains unblocked for vehicles, but from that point, there are any number of routes to choose from.”

“Which means that we can only defend the compound,” states Cayden.

“We suggest a preliminary block a hundred meters into the City. If we can’t hold them there then we’ll have to drop back into the compound, leaving them to face no man’s land.”

“And if they manage to survive no man’s land?” asks Tom.

The room is silent, one and all knowing the answer to that question.

“If they should manage that, then we have lost,” answers Orin eventually.

“Then allow me to suggest a backup plan,” begins Tom.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Deeta

“How’s your arm?” I ask softly. “Do you think it’ll be alright?”

“It’ll be fine.” Tom doesn’t look at me but pulls a grey and black camouflage shirt over the top of his black tee shirt.

“Ryder said you’d been detailed on a special mission.” My voice is strained.

“Something about taking the Lewises communications down.”

“That’s right.” Tom continues to button his shirt.

“Ryder isn’t going with you?”

“No; Jamie and Robin will come part of the way, but they have their own missions,” answers Tom, pulling a bullet proof vest over his head. I move forwards to help him secure it in place, and for a few seconds we stand together motionless.

“Your chances aren’t very good, are they, Tom?”

He steps backwards and away from me.

“Not particularly.”

He checks the magazine in one of the guns lined up on the chest of drawers, and slides it into the holster at his waist. His movements quick and precise. For a second I watch his calmness, and the capability of his hands as they fiddle with the intricacies of the weapons.

“Why you, Tom?” I arrest his arm as he moves to pick something from off the table.

“You have Uncle Jep and the children all relying on you.”

Tom looks down at me and I see a sudden frown settle on his face.

“What are you doing in that get up?” he asks, eyeing my camouflage jumpsuit with disfavour.

“You heard Val.” I’m surprised by the anger in his voice. “Anyone with any experience is required to help.”

“Not you, so you can go and take that stuff off.”

“Tom, I’ve got to —”

Tom closes the drawer he has opened with a sharp click, and turns to face me, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“I said go and take it off.”

“But, Tom —”

“For goodness sake, Deeta!” he exclaims impatiently. “Why do you insist on thwarting me? Why do you think I volunteered for this mission? So that you could get your head blown off by some Lewis thug?” His hands encircle my arms, gripping me painfully. “I’m trying to protect you, Deeta, why are you making it so hard for me?”

The room is silent for a moment. I gaze up into his face, watching as the frustration and anger disappear to be replaced by another, very different emotion. How often Tom has looked at me just like this, but before I never guessed at the battle that was
raging within him. It’s only now, as I see the tautness in his frame and feel the
struggle and hesitation of his fingers digging into my flesh, that I recognise that he is
fighting something in himself. Suddenly one hand comes up and I feel him brush the
curls back from my face.

“You’re making it too hard on me, Deeta, far too hard. Maybe that’s just an excuse,
I don’t know. Maybe it’s just that I’m a little crazy with fever and the fear that this
time I won’t come back. Fear that if I don’t, my biggest regret will be that I never did
this…”

Tom’s embrace is firm but it is a moment before he kisses me, as though even now,
at this late stage, he might draw back. After a moment his head drops and his lips
touch mine lightly. It is only when he is sure of my acceptance that his arms tighten
and his kiss becomes more demanding. Tom is nothing if not thorough and, having
waited such a long time, he seems in no mood to rush. I stir a little so that I can steal
my arm around his neck, and immediately his embraceslackens. If I want to, I know I
could pull away.

I don’t want to.

“Tom?” My voice is as unsteady as the legs that are holding me up. His fingers
cress my cheek gently, their rough texture surprisingly pleasurable.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a long time.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know; maybe I
should have left it at just wanting.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“So am I.” He grins.

We stay still, holding on to each other tightly and revelling in this new found
closeness between us.

“Did you know?” asks Tom suddenly.

“About what?”

“How I felt about you?”

“Not until yesterday when we were running away from the Andak guard. You took a
bullet for me, Tom; you had to like me a little bit.”

“I’d take a thousand bullets for you if it would keep you safe and happy,” answers
Tom.

“Your being riddled with a thousand bullets would not make me happy, Tom, let’s
get that straight here and now!”

“And I like you more than a little,” continues Tom.

“Yeah… well…” I blush.

When Jamie walks in it’s to find us embracing again.

“Oh, sorry, Tom.” Jamie begins to back out of the room, embarrassed, but comes to
an abrupt halt as he sees just who it is that Tom is so busy with. “Deeta?”

“Hi, Jamie.” I greet him airily, acutely aware of the fact that I am sandwiched
between Tom and the chest of drawers.

“Jamie, I’m a bit busy, we’ll talk later.” Tom’s tone is curt, inviting Jamie’s
absence.

“Yes, I can see that; with Deeta!” responds Jamie incredulously.

“Jamie, I realised that what I’m about to say is very impolite, but I’m sure you’ll
understand.” Tom takes a deep, steadying breath. “Get lost would you?”

“What? Oh, sorry… right… sure!” Jamie grins, tucking his hands into his pockets
and backing out of the door. “Sorry!”

As the door closes on him we hear his muffled voice.

“Hey, hold up, mate! Take my advice; your presence is not required in there, trust
me!”
Tom laughs and shakes his head, leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine.
“What now, Tom?”
“Well, here’s how I see it; I have about five or ten minutes before I have to report in
and my mission gets underway. I can’t think of a better way of spending that time
than with you.”
“You’re still going to go.” It is a statement of fact, not a question.
“Someone has to.”
“Why does it have to be you? It’s not fair.”
“And if it was Joe Blogs, would that be fair?”
“No, I didn’t mean… it would be a lot easier on me if it were, Tom.” I brush the
back of my hand across my wet cheeks. “What if you don’t come back?”
“Deeta…” Tom pushes my chin up and my eyes meet his. “I can’t promise you
anything but this: I will do everything humanly possible to come back to you. Do you
think that, just as I finally have you, I want to do this?”
I brush my tears away, determined that I won’t cry while he’s still here to see it. Tom
takes my hand and together we walk to the Depot. I can’t shake the knowledge that in
a very short time he will leave me.
What if he doesn’t come back?

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Ryder

Ryder is already present in the warehouse and raises his eyebrow fractionally at
Tom, beckoning him to the table he’s standing by.
“What happened to it being far too great a risk to Deeta?” he asks slyly as Tom joins
him.
“I’m sorry I’m not sure to what your talking about,” answers Tom blandly.
“You’ve got a decided spring in you step, my lad, and Deeta has that just been
physically assaulted look. What happened to make you change your mind?”
“Come on, Rye, you know the odds as well as I do. If I’m gonna get a bullet or two
in the head today…” He breaks off looking down at the map. “I guess I couldn’t face
it when Deeta didn’t know that I loved her.”
Ryder gazes down at Tom’s bent head and for the first time in a long time feels that
certain something of being the elder sibling, a sort of protectiveness. It’s something he
hasn’t felt since he and Tom were children, something it never occurred to him that he
would still feel for Tom. After all, his brother is now a fully grown and more than
capable man nearing thirty with a whole family depending on him.
Val returns to the table, calling Ryder back to the present and he becomes brisk.
“We’ve ascertained that the Lewises communications base is just here, well behind
enemy lines.”
“If we attack here, there will be a momentary breach in their defences. In the
reshuffle to close the gap, you’ll be able to slip through,” states Val.
“But getting in is the easy bit, Tom.”
“You have another suggestion, Rye? I’d be glad to give it a shot.”
“For goodness sake, Tom; don’t joke about taking shots!” rasps Ryder, his inner
worry breaking through his outward calm.
“Do me a favour, would you, Rye?”
“I’ll look after them, don’t worry,” interrupts Ryder, knowing Tom’s thoughts.
Tom is silent for a moment, unsure how to express himself.
“Don’t do it,” advises Ryder, with a rather rigid smile. “Just come back, then you won’t have to make this embarrassing speech.”
If he’s captured, stay well out of it.”
“Tom —”
“Promise me, Ryder. He’s poison, and in taking our revenge he’ll poison us too.”
Ryder hesitates for a moment before nodding in agreement.
Tom climbs on the waiting motor bike and, together with Jamie and Robin, makes his way out of the compound and into the City.

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Deeta

The depot is quiet after they are gone. I hear the throb of the bikes engines as they fade into the distance.
“It’s a backup plan, Deeta.” Ryder appears at my side. “He may never have to do it; maybe the preliminary block will work.”
“We both know that’s not very likely, Rye.” I look up at him; he’s gazing at the doors which are closing after Tom’s departure. He seems far away, lost in his own unhappy thoughts.
“Where will you be, Rye?”
“I have command of the north east post.”
“You’re on the front line, aren’t you?”
He doesn’t acknowledge my question, and I know by his silence that I’m right.
“Robin and Jamie will go part way with, Tom. Pip, Ralph, and Nella have already taken up their positions.” I rub the tears out of my eyes. “How many of you will come back?”
“Sometimes you have to fight to protect the things you love, Deeta.” His voice is soft.
“What if you can’t fight for them? What if you have to stand and watch as they slip through your fingers?” I shake my head. “I’m sorry, Rye; forget I said that.”
We stand in silence, both knowing that soon he too must leave.
“Come back, Rye, for Janny’s sake; please come back.”
He doesn’t respond, either by word or look. I guess because there isn’t a response to my words. What can he say? He can’t promise me that he’ll live through the battle that awaits. My gaze travels back to the table that Tom was pouring over just a few short moments ago. Val is there still, a pen tucked behind one ear and a ruler in his hand. He is, I believe, calculating by hand the speed at which the Lewises are travelling and the estimated time of their arrival.
I don’t think that he sees her at first, his attention is so absorbed by his task. Suddenly he seems to notice that the person standing across from him is sheathed in a violet dress, not grey and black camouflage, and he looks up quickly.
“Hi.” Val looks surprised and for some seconds he just stares up at her, not thinking to straighten.
“I’m sorry, you’re busy…” Charlotte makes to leave and Val jerks upright, his hand outstretched towards her.
“No, no, I’m not!”
I see the beginnings of a smile trembling on Charlotte’s lips.
“Okay, so actually I’m very busy,” amends Val with a sheepish grin. “What did you want?”
For a second Charlotte is undecided, a nervous fear that I can see even at this distance filling her eyes.
“I guess I wanted to say…” Her voice trails off as she gropes for an appropriate way to express herself. Her eyes fill with tears. “Please come back, Val.”
She raises her hand as though she will cover her face but Val reaches out, taking her hands in his own and pulling her trembling form into his arms. Charlotte clings to him tightly as the tears stream down her face, and I turn from them abruptly.
How is it that this terrible thing we’re facing is sorting out the problems that, just a few short hours ago, seemed insurmountable? Both bringing us together and yet tearing us apart?
“I have to go, Deeta.” Ryder’s voice is hesitant. “Tell Jan I love her, will you?”
Before I can answer him, he is gone, striding off towards the truck that will take him to his post. He swings up into the seat not turning to look at me again.
“Deeta?”
I turn sharply at the sound of my name being called, and find that Val is beckoning me.
“Did you want something?” I ask in surprise.
His arm tightens around Charlotte and in his eyes I see his reluctance to express himself. It’s as though he knows what he must do, but at the same time feels an almost overpowering urge to rebel against it.
“I have to take my station, could you… would you take Charlotte to the pavilion? Come to think of it you ought to be there yourself.”
I nod my acceptance of the task but still Val does not relinquish her, if anything his hold tightens.
“Charlotte, I… I have to go now.” He bends his head, kissing her again and then he’s gone. He leaves Charlotte and me to face each other awkwardly.
“I guess we’d better go.”
“Yeah, I suppose we had.”
I see Charlotte trying vainly to hold her tears in check as we turn and leave the bustling depot behind us.
“You know, I keep thinking.” Charlotte’s voice is thick with suppressed emotion. “Is it worse for them or us? I mean, at least they are doing something. They don’t have to sit and wait and wonder and hope.” Her grey eyes are rather wild and bright. “And if they did die, it’s actually us who have to live with it. It’s us who feel the loss; we are the ones that are left behind, trying to forget.” She only just manages to finish her sentence before her voice is suspended with tears.
I don’t know how to answer. Who it hurts the most doesn’t seem to be very important to me. I just pat her arm in what I hope is a comforting manner, and continue in silence.
“Do you have a boyfriend?” she asks suddenly.
I am on the verge of saying no when I suddenly remember the feel of Tom’s arms around me, the ardour of his kisses. I smile, feeling suddenly very warm.
“Yes, I do have a boyfriend.”
“Then you know what I mean.” Her hand squeezes my arm painfully, her eyes eager and friendly. “You know how much it hurts.”
We walk along in silence, passing out of the town hall and into the pleasure gardens.
“I’ve been an idiot.” Her voice is miserable. “You see; Val and I used to be engaged.”

I look at her out of the corner of my eye feeling a growing discomfort. After all, I already know quite a bit about Charlotte and Val’s failed romance. Her acceptance of my ignorance is making me feel slightly dishonest.

“There were… problems, circumstances that I allowed to get in the way,” continues Charlotte. She pauses for a moment before adding impetuously. “I ran, what was I thinking? I let her scare me away and I hurt Val.” She shakes her head and I have the feeling that though she is speaking out loud, she is talking more to herself than me.

“And then I hid.” Her voice is bitter. “And when Val came I wouldn’t see him. All he wanted to do was talk to me, to try and understand, to make things right, but I wouldn’t give him the chance. All I could think about was myself, how I felt, how hurt I was, how hard it was for me. I never even considered what he was going through. I told myself that I loved him will all my heart and yet I didn’t give him a thought; I just left him hanging. There I was wallowing in self pity, and the whole time I was short changing Val!” She turns to me suddenly demanding. “You know?”

After a small pause I answer with the only words that I know to be true, they are all that I can give her that will be of help.

“Love is longsuffering and kind, love is not jealous, it does not brag, does not get puffed up, does not behave indecently, does not look for its own interests, it does not become provoked, it does not keep account of the injury. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.” I give her a smile before ending softly. “Love never fails.”

Charlotte looks at me with awed eyes.

“Wow… that’s so deep!”

For a second I stare at her, torn between incredulous amusement and disbelief as I realise that she believes the words to be my own wisdom.

“It’s from the Bible,” I tell her. “I like it because it reminds me what love should be like, could be like, if you’re willing to put in the effort.”

We have arrived outside the pavilion at this point and Charlotte takes my hand, halting my progress up the steps.

“What’s your name?”

“Deeta Richards.”

“Deeta, would you wait with me? I’m not sure if I can face it alone.” Charlotte’s voice is nervous and I hear a sudden almost hysterical undertone.

“You can wait with us.” I smile, slipping my hand through hers and leading her up the steps.

“Who’s us?”

“My parents, and my sisters Jan and Clare, our friends Keya and Mari, Jennet, Fay, Tina, and the children. I promise they don’t bite!”

She relaxes and smiles a little as we enter the crowded pavilion.
Chapter Thirty

Deeta

The pavilion looks so different from the other times that I have seen it, so sober and disorderly, completely at odds with its usual air of pristine elegance and gaiety.

“Aunty Deet!”

I hear Carris’s voice, loud against the surrounding quiet, and make my way to where she’s sitting on Jan’s lap.

“Where have you been, Deet?” asks Jan, the customary airiness of her greeting conspicuous by its absence. Looking down into her taut face I see her eyes are feverish and uncertain.

“I went to see Tom off.” I hesitate. “I was surprised not to see you there.”

“I didn’t want to see Rye off with tears.” Her voice is brusque and determined.

“Charlotte, why don’t you sit down here between me and Roydon?”

We settle ourselves into place and Roydon, seeing that Charlotte is on the verge of tears, tries to cheer her up. I hear him asking her, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, why the sea roared.

“I had a quick word with Ryder before he left, he told me to tell you he loves you.”

For a second Jan remains stock still and then, with a sudden dry sob, she cradles her head in her hands. Carris slips from Jan’s knee, and I see Clare pull the worried little girl into her arms. I cuddle Jan to me, smoothing her hair back from her face.

“Janny don’t, please don’t.”

Jan’s shuddering sobs only continue.

“What am I going to do, Deeta?” Her voice cracks. “What will I do if he doesn’t come back?”

Clare is sitting on the other side of Jan, and as she hears this utterance her startled eyes meet mine questioningly. Before either of us can say anything, my mother almost drags me from my place next to Jan. She slides her arm around her youngest daughter, asking her what’s wrong.

I feel someone’s hand on my shoulder.

From the look on my father’s face I know that he heard Jan’s words.

“If who doesn’t come back, Deeta?” His voice is a little stern and I see the anxiety in his face.

“His name’s Ryder.”

“And who is Ryder?”

“He’s Andak. In fact, he’s Tom’s brother.”

My father pushes me into the chair opposite Jan.

“I think you’d better explain, Deeta.”

“You remember me telling you that when we first got here, we were taken to holding rooms? Ryder gave that order because he saw the locket Tom gave me and
recognised it. He knew that there was a chance that someone else might recognise it too, and he didn’t want anyone else to know. At that point he was under the impression that Tom and Dec had been kept prisoner by our tribe —”

“How did he think that?” asks my mother.

“Because that’s what someone told him. We knew that someone in Tom’s tribe was killing the Andak brothers. At that point we thought it was an Andak brother, because we couldn’t see that anyone else had a reason to want them dead. Due to misapprehensions, on both our side and his, we didn’t trust each other at first. Yet he still looked after us the whole time; he protected us even though we must have been driving him crazy.” I pause momentarily. “In any case he took quite a fancy to Jan right from the start. I think he liked her spunk and I’m pretty sure that the feeling was mutual.”

“How mutual?” asks my father dryly.

“He asked me to marry him.” Jan’s voice is husky and I see her eyes pleading across the distance to our father. “I told him I would.”

I hear my mother and Clare gasp at this disclosure, and watch nervously as my father appraises Jan’s tear stained face.

“I don’t know, Deeta; both of your sisters have stolen a march on you.” His tone is soft and kind, and I see Jan’s face break into a tremulous smile.

“Not for long, Dad.”

“Aha! So Tom managed it in the end, did he?”

“Not without an epic struggle.” I hesitate shyly. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Only since you were about fourteen, Deeta,” he laughs.

“Dad, you couldn’t possibly have!”

“You’ll find that fathers have a sixth sense where their daughters are concerned.” He slides his arm around me and we sit back down on our chairs, lapsing into silence.

I find my thoughts on Tom, fighting to protect us out there in the City. In a way it’s a strangely comforting thought; that someone loves me so much, they’re willing to give their life for mine.

The explosion is deafening, breaking into the silence with such sudden violence I jump from my chair, my hand clamped tightly over my mouth.

“They’re here.” Mari’s voice is soft, and she clutches Dec and Jojo to her more tightly.

“Don’t worry, mum; Uncle Tom’ll send ‘em packing.” Dec’s voice is proudly certain.

The second explosion is quickly followed by a third and a fourth, until the sound of fighting is a constant cacophony of noise. I close my eyes, turn my face into my father’s shoulder, and pray.

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Jimmy

Jimmy pauses on the stairwell, leaning breathlessly against the wall. Even in here he can hear the sound of the battle outside. The fighting had been heavy, the Andak more prepared than he had thought possible. Still, he didn’t have a doubt that the Lewises would come off the winners. They were power crazed thugs, capable of the sort of brutality that the Andak were not. They would prevail in the end, and then he would kill the council of both tribes. With their leaders dead, the fighting would come to an
abrupt halt, and he would use his influence in both tribes to secure the power of leadership for himself.

Jimmy begins to climb the stairwell again, eventually reaching the last flight that leads up to the roof. His progress doesn’t slow as he moves on to the metal stretchers, but he leaps onto them without really noticing. His head is filled with the triumphant vision of his brilliance.

He’s half way up the metal ladder before the rusted brackets holding it to the wall give way under his weight, and the stairs fall fifty stories to the ground below.

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Deeta

The battle has been raging for hours, the sounds of warfare steadily creeping nearer to us. The children are gathered on the floor playing monopoly. They seem to have accepted the frightening sounds from outside as normal, and their attention is fully occupied with the game. I wish I could be so relaxed but every gunshot, every explosion that sets the ground trembling, tears at my heart and pounds in my head.

I hear a commotion and turn to the entrance of the pavilion. A dishevelled soldier in dusty camouflage makes his way towards us, and with an inarticulate cry Jan casts herself into his arms. Ryder holds her tightly, a look of deep relief and thankfulness on his face. He closes his eyes and rests his cheek against her hair.

“I told you I’d come back, Jan.” His arms tighten, crushing her to him as though for the past hours this moment has been all he has thought of.

“Is it over?”

“No, not yet.” He raises his eyes to mine, and before he speaks I know what he will say. “I’ve come to tell you that the preliminary block didn’t work. Now it’s up to Tom.”

His expression is sad, reaching across the distance between us, trying to reassure me. There are dark circles around his eyes and fatigue in every line of his body. A light film of moisture covers his face, a testament to the ordeal he has been through.

“We both knew it would be.” My voice is calm, completely at odds with the turmoil in my head and the pain in my heart.

For a while there is silence, and then Ryder’s eyes fall on my father and I see him realise just who Dad is.

“So you must be Ryder?”

“Yes, sir; that would be me.” Although his reply is polite, I see a defensive gleam enter his eyes. “I think that you ought to know that I asked your daughter to marry me and she accepted.”

I see a mischievous smile play about my father’s mouth.

“Did she? Well if Deeta wants to, I see no reason why I should stop her.”

Ryder stiffens in surprise, he’s not used to having the mickey taken out of him and I can see he’s not too sure about the flavour.

“I think you understand that I was referring to Jan.” He answers carefully.

“That’s just as well seeing as though you’ve got both arms around her,” replies my father. “Just what is it Tom’s up to?”

“He’s breaking through enemy lines so that he can take their communications out,” answers Ryder.

“How many people has he got with him?”

“Jamie and Robin, but they’ll only take him as far as the Lewises front line.”
I hear their voices as if from a distance, echoing a little and growing fainter. Then there is only blackness.

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I come round to feel some one smoothing my hair back from my face, and groan softly.
“Look, look! She’s waking up!” Carris calls excitedly.
“Are you sure she’s not just snoring?” asks a second voice. It takes me a while to realise it belongs to Jojo.
“Aunty Deet doesn’t snore,” comes Tarri’s indignant voice.
I open my eyes carefully and find three childish faces bent close to me, blocking my view.
“See; she awake. Are you alright, Aunty Deet?”
“I’m fine thanks, Carry; what happened?”
“You feel asleep standing up,” answers Jojo.
“She did not!” breaks in Dec scornfully. “She got up to quite, it made her dizzy.”
“I’ve bought you an apple to make you feel better,” interrupts Tarri, climbing over me to offer me the gift. Her knees find all my soft spots.
“Thanks, Tarri.”
“You’re welcome.”
I struggle upright and hold my aching head in my hands.
“How do you feel, are you alright?” My mother’s voice is tender.
For a moment I just gaze at her, tears gathering in my eyes. The second I see their faces, I know that something’s wrong.
“Where’s Ryder?”
“He went back to the control room an hour and a half ago,” answers my father, dropping to his knees beside me. “Deeta, Tom managed to destroy the Lewises communications post. They’ve gone, it’s all over. Without the link to each other, and the added problem of no man’s land, they couldn’t win. The losses they sustained were very heavy, too heavy, and they had to retreat.” My father hesitates, and I close my eyes as though it will stop the blow I can feel coming.
“Where’s Tom, Dad?”
“We don’t know, Deeta,” replies my father gently. “The Lewises comm. link went down an hour ago, he should have been back.”
His arms close around me comfortingly as I cry, and as he soothes me I hear the distress in his voice. I’m not sure how long I remain enfolded in his embrace, but suddenly I struggle to break free.
“Please, Dad; let me go to the control room? Let me talk to Ryder. Tom could still be out there, he might not be…”
“Ryder’s out searching in the City, Deeta.” Jan’s face is tearstained, her voice choked up.
I look at my father again, squeezing his hand tightly in my own.
“Please, Dad. Please?”
I see my father suddenly come to a decision and he pulls me to my feet. As we leave the pavilion I’m dimly aware that Jan, Clare, and my mother are following, along with Tina, Jennet, Fay, Mari, Jojo, and Charlotte. We pass through the pleasure garden, across the road, and up the steps into the great hall.
I’ve never seen it so crowded. There are people everywhere, men and women in torn and dusty camouflage embracing their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, wives, and sweethearts. I see in their faces the relief that I long to feel and my pace quickens.

“Hold up there, Deeta, where are you going?” He catches my arm as I pass him, and my momentum spins me round to face him.

“Val!”

Before he has time to release me, Charlotte flings her arms around his neck and kisses him. I try to pull my arm from his slackened grip but his hand tightens, holding me in place and making me wait for him.

“I guess you missed me,” he asks Charlotte quietly, a smile curving his mouth. Then he turns to me again. “Where are you going?”

“Val, did you hear about Tom?”

He responds with an affirmative nod.

“I just want to know what’s happening. I thought maybe if I went to the control room, that maybe… maybe…” My voice trails off, but Val seems to know what I mean.

“Right you are. Come on then, I’ll take you myself.” Val leads us through the hall towards a door and through a maze of passages.

“Val this isn’t —” begins Charlotte, only to be unceremoniously silenced with a kiss.

“Subterfuge never was your strong point, was it, love?” Val asks with a smile. Charlotte looks perplexed, but makes no move to speak again.

“And here we are,” says Val, rounding a corner and coming to a halt in front of a door.

“But this is —” begins Jojo.

“Jojo go and get yourself a glass of water from the dispenser up the hall,” commands Mari.

“But, Mummy, I’m not thirsty!”

“Then get one for me: now, Jojo!”

I see a look of bemused confusion on Jojo’s face, but she does as she’s told. Val pushes the door open and steps through into the room, pulling Charlotte with him. I hear voices from within float out towards me.

“Don’t even try it, pal.” His tone holds a warning.

“But, sir, you need a shot: it will take away the pain,” assures the doctor.

“It’ll knock me out and I’m not ready to be knocked out just yet, so put that thing away and stop making me feel like you’re going to stick it in me the moment I take my eyes off you.” Tom looks up as Val enters. “You were quick, where is she?”

Before he has finished the sentence, his eyes have travelled past Val and come to rest on me.

“She met me half way, mate,” answers Val, leaning against a table and pulling Charlotte against him.

For a second I stand completely still in front of the door and just gaze at him. He looks dishevelled, he has a graze down one cheek and is lying propped up by pillows. He smiles at me lazily, a faintly teasing, rueful light in his eyes.

“I’m afraid it’s going to have to be a case of the mountain coming to Muhammad,” he grins apologetically, “‘cos I’m stuck on this bed for a while.”

Acutely aware of the many indulgent eyes that are upon us, I take a few hesitant steps to the foot of his bed.

“You’re hurt?”

“Not that bad.”
“What happened?” I ask, edging a step closer. “Got hit a few times in the leg, but it’ll be fine.”

“Mr. Tomasz was very fortunate,” breaks in the doctor. “The three bullets to his leg did minimal damage. He suffered a few minor abrasions, two very deep knife wounds, and a great many bruises. But he should be fit as a fiddle in no time,” he assures me, seeing that my lower lip has begun to tremble.

“It’s good to see you all in one piece, Tom.” My father comes forwards and I see him exchange a knowing look with Tom.

“Thank you, sir, I’m rather relieved to find myself still in one piece,” he replies. “Doctor Burns wants to stick me full of needles, but first, if you don’t mind, I’d like a private word with Deeta.”

“I think that could be arranged,” answers my father with a grin.

I keep my eyes fixed on the covers on Tom’s bed as they leave, unable to look directly at anyone. The warmth of my face assures me that my colour is up.

“Hey, Tom?” Ryder’s voice comes from the doorway, lazy and amused. “Try to remember that you are an invalid, won’t you?”

The door shuts behind him and Tom and I are left alone. For interminable seconds neither of us speaks and I begin to chew on my lip anxiously.

“I think you’re being very unfair, Deeta.”

“Why?”

“Because you know I can’t move, and yet you’re insisting on standing just out of my reach.” He laughs and holds his hand out toward me, waiting until I place my hand in his, before drawing me towards him.

“What is it?” With my head just inches from his, I feel his arm slide around my waist. His hold is light and possessive, as though that is where his arm belongs.

“Tom, do you think we could get married very soon?” I ask.

Tom looks down at me, a sudden serious light entering his eyes.

“What?!”

“Tom, do you think we could get married very soon?”

Tom looks down at me, his face showing plainly the worry and apprehension he is feeling.

“Do you love me, Tom?”

He looks surprised by the question.

“More than I could tell you, Deetina.”

I snuggle up a little closer to him, pushing the fringe back from his forehead.

“Then that’s all that matters. I’m not going to let other people’s jealousy come between you and me; so do you think that we could get married soon?”

Tom’s eyes narrow a little.

“Not that I don’t find your urgency incredibly flattering, but why do you keep asking me that?”
“Because I sat in that pavilion today and all I could think about was all the time I’ve wasted, all the time I’ve missed with you. Now I’ve got a second chance I’m not going to waste a second longer than is decently possible!” I answer with feeling.

It’s some time later that I’m interrupted from the very pleasurable task of trying to make Tom forget his aches and pains, without the aid of drugs, by a very indignant little voice.

“Deeta! What are you doing to Uncle Tom?” asks Jojo shocked, almost spilling the cup of water she carries. “Can’t you see he’s not very well?”
Epilogue

The wind swirls around us as we stand all together in the clearing. It’s a cold wind, but I don’t feel it; Tom’s frame is blotting out the chill. I lean my head back against his shoulder, smiling as his arms tighten around my waist.

They found Jimmy dead in a broken down stairwell after the battle was over. Perhaps it’s best that he died the way he did, that he didn’t live to cause any more pain. Perhaps even he has found rest from the bitterness in his soul.

So here we are at what could conceivably be called the end of an era, but as with all ends it is merely a new beginning. After all that has happened the different tribes will no longer be so isolated from one another; we can’t hide behind the mistrust that has enveloped us all in our own worlds for so long. Life will be safe again, we will be able to leave our buildings and walk freely through our territories. We’ve built trust, now we will build friendships. Through all the trials and tribulations, our journey through fire, by risking our all we have won so much, not only as a whole but as individuals.

Jamie finally has Keya back, a more manageable and less arrogant Keya, but I don’t think he will complain. Ralph’s patience has finally paid off; I see Nella whispering in his ear as she slides her arms around his neck. As for Janny, I can hardly see her for Ryder’s protective bulk.

Around us are many others, battle scarred and weary but happy and at peace. We drink deeply of the moment, not wanting to speak that its beauty might not be soiled by inadequate words.

So many people, so different and used to a furtive way of life. We have been so lost and so alone. It’s strange to think that in the end it’s these two things that unite us all, here in our broken city.

The End
Broken Truce

(Broken City, #2)

Life isn’t turning out the way Deeta thought it would. With the Lewises defeated and peace between the tribes, she’d believed that the dark times were in the past.

However, troubles between the tribes continue, and the Andak council has selected Tom as ambassador and chief spokesmen to the other tribes.

Deeta knows that there is still much resentment against the Andak, that Tom is in danger every time he leaves the safety of Andak city.

Struggling with her own complicated feelings against the tribe that she is now a part of, Deeta tries to ignore the changing attitudes growing within her.

Then Tom is betrayed and, with the whole City thrown in to great danger, Deeta finds that reality can’t be ignored forever…
Fracture
The Chronicles of Discord

In a world torn apart by war, three nations stand divided.

**The Free Nation**
Senator Burton and his son Ben arrive in the Tula Strongholds for peace talks, but find that a treaty between the two nations has a price. Confronted by a world of sedate tranquility the two men are appalled to learn that the Tula Council rules with an iron rod of fear and repression. The Council removes anyone who dares to stand in the way of their reforms, and Ben uncovers a secret that puts his life in danger.

**The Tula**
Astra has been pressured into working for the very Council that threatens to kill her loved ones. No stranger to loss, the precariously balanced world she has constructed begins to fracture when Ben starts asking questions about her past. As her deepest secrets are uncovered, Astra finds there are mysteries in her childhood that even she is unaware of.

**The Una**
Kai is Apprentice Headman to the Una people. Unaccountably called upon to sacrifice his honor in the name of peace, Kai’s hatred toward this injustice proves all consuming. If the time comes, will he be able to forgive the woman that betrayed him?

When these three worlds collide ugly truths come to light on every side. Is there any way to make peace, or will the world end in discord?
Orphaned as a child, Adele of Berron found herself betrothed to a stranger and hidden from the outside world until the day of her marriage. Forced to leave her home and those who have cared for her from infancy, Adele is thrust into the adventure of her life.

Rafe of Valrek, her companion through the dangerous web of intrigue she faces, had been promised to Adele since the battle for Calis devastated both of their lives. His reckless decision to conceal his identity from her may destroy all he holds dear. Or maybe in each other they will find the ally neither ever dreamed existed.